

dc\_243\_11

**Akadémiai doktori értekezés**

# **Philip Larkin's Poetics: Theory and Practice**

RÁCZ ISTVÁN

**2011**

## Contents

1. Introduction: Larkin and Poetics	3
1.1. A Typology of First-person Poems	4
1.2. Larkin Studies: Biography versus Poetry	9
2. Larkin's Principles of Writing Poetry	25
2.1. Experience and the Tradition of the "English Line"	26
2.1.1. Experience in the "Statement"	27
2.1.2. The Two Stages of Composition	31
2.2. Beauty, Truth and Deception: the Art of Choosing	39
2.2.1. Keats and Larkin	40
2.2.2. Something and Nothing as Experience	45
2.2.3. Idyll and Facing Death	50
2.3. Audenesque Larkin: Non-literary Literature	55
2.3.1. Two Poets and Two Generations	55
2.3.2. Transmutation and Transference	57
2.3.3. For and against Auden	63
2.4. Character, Mask and Monologue	67
2.4.1. Masks and Poetry	67
2.4.2. Masks and Monologues in Larkin	72
2.5. Hardyesque Larkin: Pain in Agnostic Narratives	80
2.5.1. The Lack of Initiation	81
2.5.2. The Consciousness of Death	85
2.5.3. Religion and Agnosticism	88
2.6. Language, Death and Transcendence	93
2.6.1. Experience Outside and Inside	93
2.6.2. Names, Words and the Reliability of Language	97
2.6.3. Asking Questions about Human Life	101

3. Writing about Time 108

3.1. Time as Prison and the Chances of Escape 109

3.1.1. Metaphors of Time 109

3.1.2. Time as the Moment in History 114

3.1.3. The Figure of the Academic Revisited 120

3.1.4. Time, Death and Work 122

3.1.5. Living in Time 127

3.1.6. Genealogy 131

3.2. Aging 135

3.2.1. From Birth to Old Age 135

3.2.2. Witnessing the Passing of Time 139

3.2.3. Questions about Freedom 143

3.2.4. Confession and Remembering 149

3.2.5. Confessions of an Agnostic 153

3.3. Time as Space 160

3.3.1. Photography and the Past 160

3.3.2. There and Here 167

3.3.3. Time, Space and Rituals 170

3.3.4. Dickens and Son 175

3.3.5. Time as Painting and Architecture 181

4. Coda and Conclusion: Larkin from a Hungarian Perspective 189

Abbreviations 197

Works Cited 198

## 1. Introduction: Larkin and Poetics

Owing to a great number of publications, readers know more and more about Philip Larkin the man and Philip Larkin the poet. Since the publication of the three most widely used sources (the *Collected Poems* in 1988, the *Selected Letters* in 1992, and Andrew Motion's authorized biography in 1993) numerous further books, essays and articles have contributed to Larkin studies. These include publications of Larkin's texts (such as *Further Requirements* in 2001, *Trouble at Willow Gables* in 2002, and *Early Poems and Juvenilia* in 2005), personal recollections (for instance, Maeve Brennan's *The Philip Larkin I Knew* in 2002), another biography (Richard Bradford's *First Boredom, Then Fear* in 2005), and critical studies (the latest being M. W. Rowe's *Philip Larkin: Art and Self* in 2011). A. T. Tolley's *Larkin at Work* (1997) offers an insight into the genesis of a number of major poems and Larkin's method of composition. Shorter essays add further aspects to the discussion of Larkin. To mention a few examples: Oliver James has approached "This Be The Verse" from a genetician's point of view, Richard T. Cauldwell has analyzed Larkin's recorded readings phonetically, and David Punter has applied Melanie Klein's psychoanalysis to his poems.

All these are important in the study of Larkin, but none of the authors has attempted to discuss Larkin's poetics as a coherent whole. The reason seems only too obvious: Larkin's life work is the exact opposite of Eliot's, whose theory and criticism form a framework around his poetry. My aim with this study is to explore how Larkin's poetry is pulled together as a cohesive whole by the principles of his poetics manifest in his short essays, interviews, reviews, letters, and the poems themselves. My main interest will be the mechanism of poetry as Larkin conceived of it: how experience can and should become a poem.

Larkin was not one of the major essay writers in the history of British poetry. He never wrote a text comparable with Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" or Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent". This lack of a conceptualized theory, however, does not indicate a lack of principles. In the first part of this study I will offer an outline of Larkin's poetics, which is controversial, yet still firm enough to give a theoretical background to his poetry. In the second part I will make an attempt to demonstrate how Larkin put his principles into practice in the poems about his major subject matter: the passing of time.

Although Larkin refrained from conceptualization, his poetics cannot be discussed without exploring what he thought of, and how he wrote, first-person lyrics. Therefore, by way of introduction, I will first offer a possible typology of first-person poems, since the

definition of various forms is in the centre of any poetics. This will be followed by a brief summary of Larkin studies.

### *1.1. A Typology of First-Person Poems*

It is a commonplace to say that lyric poetry can often be read as the poet's autobiography: read a poet's texts in chronological order, and you will see his/her psychological history, the story of the creation of his/her identity. We can ask the question: should we read first-person poems as parts of an autobiography (in which the reference is to something outside the text, the real poet), or as fiction (that is something invented, like the action and characters of a novel)? Paul de Man answered that "the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable". He added: "Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts" (70). In other words: autobiography is always fictitious, and fiction is always autobiographical. It is particularly important to see this when we discuss lyric poetry.

We can draw two conclusions. 1. Any poem can be read in the context of the poet's autobiography (his or her life story), but also independently from it, in a different context. To apply it to first-person poems: whenever the poet creates an "I" in a text, s/he also creates a fictitious identity. 2. We should see a two-way process between the author and the text. The poem is not only the representation of the author's self: it is also *a part of* the poet's constant identity creation. First-person poems contribute to constructing the poet's own identity; in this way the poem becomes a part of his/her personal history.

The speaker (who is a textual construct) is never fully identical with the real poet (a flesh-and-blood person). There is, however, a third agent between the speaker and the real poet: the *implied poet*. I define the implied poet as the representation of the real poet's subjectivity in the text. Therefore, it is different both from the real poet and the speaker in the poem. This also means that the implied poet is the link between the speaker and the real poet. As opposed to the former, it is a construct. It is determined by the real poet on the one hand, and the text as an artificial structure on the other.

The speaker is always a notion constructed in the reader on the basis of the self-references in the poem; that is on the basis of all those words that refer to the speaker, directly or indirectly (cf. Rimmon-Kenan on character in fiction, 36). The notion that we form is partly verbal, since the speaker in the text is no less and no more than the words referring to

him or her. On the other hand, one also forms this notion as something non-verbal: we will base our image on real people we know and other literary figures we have read about (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 33). To mention an example from Robert Burns: when reading “Holy Willie’s Prayer” one cannot help imagining the speaker by adding elements of one’s own imagination to the picture: elements that are not in the poem, but are concerned with sanctimonious behaviour. These come from patterns that are familiar to us either from our personal (non-literary) experience or from other literary texts.

Many typologies of first-person poems are possible; in this study I will use the terms confessional poetry, dramatic lyrics, mask lyrics and dramatic monologues. In what follows I will offer a brief outline of how I define these terms.

Most readers will probably expect the speaker and the actual poet to be closer to each other than (or even identical with) the narrator and the author of a novel. (The degree of this expectation also depends on the culture of the reader; I will demonstrate this in the Conclusion.) What such readers expect is *confessional poetry*, which can be given two definitions. One relegates any kind of autobiographical poetry into this category. In other words, in confessional poetry the real poet, the implied poet and the speaker are nearly identical. The other is a narrower meaning: this is the kind of poetry which draws upon the religious sense of confession. Confessing in this sense implies intimacy either with God, or with another human being.<sup>1</sup>

The term *dramatic lyric* is an oxymoron: “dramatic” suggests something dialogic and a situation where conflicts are represented; “lyric”, on the other hand, suggests a monologic text. It follows that in dramatic lyrics the quiet and private world of the subject is made dynamic. There is one speaker in a dramatic lyric, but s/he behaves in two different ways. To apply Ralph W. Rader’s term, there are two *agents* in the poem: one is within the situation, the other is outside. This latter agent sees not only the object that the first agent saw: he/she also sees him/herself within the situation. A dramatic lyric consists of two structural units. The first part represents the *perception* of experience; the second that of *cognition*: the speaker wants to understand why this experience is so important to him/her. Therefore, I will call the two agents I mentioned before the *perceptive agent* and the *cognitive agent* of dramatic lyrics. The first perceives something: a bird singing (like in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” or Hardy’s “A Darkling Thrush”), some jars of jam in the kitchen (in Larkin’s

---

<sup>1</sup> Confessional poetry is also used as a category of literary history: a term referring to the poetry of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell and W. D. Snodgrass. Their affinity with Larkin would deserve a study in its own right.

“An April Sunday Brings the Snow”), a landscape, etc. The second contemplates this experience. The cognitive agent sees not only the situation in the first part of the poem, but also himself/herself in that situation. As opposed to confessional poetry, it is only the cognitive agent who can be nearly identified with the implied poet. In other words: in a dramatic lyric the poet constructs a speaker in a situation, and sees it as his/her fictitious self in a former situation.

In such poems, the implied poet not only constructs a speaker but also makes him/her perceive (see, hear, etc.) something. The situation is dramatic, since the speaker in the first part and then the implied poet form two different kinds of attitude to the experience represented in the poem. This does not necessarily result in a conflict, but the *difference* between the two can always be noticed. It often happens in such poems that the first part reflects pure enjoyment, which is understood or broken with in the second part. What dramatic lyrics represent at a general level is the desire to gain a thorough understanding of experience.

As a result, a dramatic lyric often represents a moment of sudden understanding, an epiphany. Another way of describing dramatic lyrics is with the help of this term—epiphany: it is a poem in which the descriptive part creates a ground for the epiphanic moment. A third way is to say that a dramatic lyric starts with the particular and ends with something general. In sum, dramatic lyrics create two agents: the speaker who *has an experience* and the implied poet who *re-creates the experience*.

Whereas in confessional poetry the experience inspiring the poem is represented from within, in dramatic lyrics the implied poet views the speaker with some detachment. (To mention two examples: in Shelley’s confessional “Ode to the West Wind” the poet is in a landscape dominated by the wind, and he prays to the wind from this position, whereas in Gray’s dramatic “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” the poet figure is observed by another fictitious character.) This latter tendency, a distancing experience, is even stronger in mask lyrics and dramatic monologues. In confessional poetry the poet’s ambition is to represent his/her own consciousness from within; in dramatic lyrics the implied poet observes the speaking agent both from the inside and from the outside. In *mask lyrics* the distance is bigger: the mask belongs to the poet, but (metaphorically speaking) also covers the face. I will attempt to offer a definition of the genre in Chapter 2.4; in this introduction I only wish to recall the most influential interpretations of 20<sup>th</sup>-century poets.

Mask became a central term in the same period in which the interest in the unconscious suddenly increased and resulted in the multiple point of view and dialogicity of

literary texts. Oscar Wilde wrote: “What is interesting about people in good society [...] is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality that lies behind the mask” (quoted in Langbaum, *The Mysteries* 168). As opposed to Wilde’s interpretation, Yeats did not think that creating a mask was an aim in itself. As Robert Langbaum summarizes it, Yeats thought “that our unconscious mind lies outside us, hence our identity comes from without. We discover who we are by looking outside not inside” (*The Mysteries* 159). Importantly, Yeats also said: “Masks are not false, because we *know* they are artifices” (quoted in Langbaum, *The Mysteries* 166). In Yeats, mask is used both as a technique of revelation (revealing the self) and as a method of hiding. In most cases, however, the reader can notice both at the same time.

It is well known that T. S. Eliot wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. One of Bradley’s beliefs was that the self is hardly distinguishable from the not-self, in other words: what is *in us* cannot be distinguished from what is *outside*. Eliot explained the essence of Bradley’s belief in this sentence of the thesis: “We have no right, except in the most provisional way, to speak of *my* experience, since the I is a construction out of experience, an abstraction from it” (quoted in Langbaum, *The Mysteries* 108). The consciousness of this uncertainty, the impossibility of distinguishing the “I” from the “non-I”, inspired Eliot to create masks in his poetry; this is his reaction to existential uncertainty. This also means that instead of hiding himself, Eliot wanted to create a possibility of communication with the reader. The masks in his poetry are so important that the whole of his life work can be interpreted and re-interpreted through them. On the basis of Eliot’s own notes one can interpret the figure of Tiresias in *The Waste Land* as the poet’s mask (also as the anti-I, a persona the poet would like to become). The same applies to Thomas Becket in the play *Murder in the Cathedral*.

The mask in a poem can be any figure that is obviously different from the poet. As Robert Langbaum writes, in the poems of young poets the mask is frequently the “mask of age”: a speaker who is older than the real age of the poet (*The Mysteries* 84). Tennyson’s “Ulysses” is a case in point. Importantly, the “mask of age”—the old man who is constructed as a speaker in a poem—can also be a mask for an older poet. Roy Fuller made this clear in his introductory essay to his selected poems: “Thinking about the poet’s ‘masks’, [...] even the ‘elderly man’ of later poems cannot be guaranteed to be the poet himself” (XVIII).

There is no mask constructed in *dramatic monologues*, a form for which two definitions are commonly used. According to one of these, a dramatic monologue is any poem in which there is a discernible and deliberately created distance between the poet and the



speaker of the poem. This definition is very general: it treats the dramatic monologue as an umbrella term, covering mask lyrics and even dramatic lyrics as well as the dramatic monologue proper. This latter leads us to the other possible definition. M.H. Abrams defines the dramatic monologue proper as a text in which “a single person, who is patently *not* the poet, utters the entire poem in a specific situation at a critical moment” (*Glossary* 46, emphasis in the original). He adds two more features to this: the speaker always addresses a fictitious listener (sometimes several fictitious listeners), and the speaker of a monologue always reveals his/her character unintentionally (*Glossary* 46). All the three features mentioned by Abrams call our attention to the same basic characteristic: a dramatic monologue is an autonomous text (and apart from some exceptional cases, not a part of a larger whole but a poem in its own right) in which the main organizing principle is the speaker’s point of view.

This *limited point of view* makes dramatic monologues similar to first-person narratives. In both kinds of text the author constructs a fictitious speaker whose point of view is a factor largely determining the text. A peculiar feature of dramatic monologues is that when we read one “we must suspend moral judgment, we must sympathize in order to read the poem” (Langbaum, *The Poetry* 93). In other words: in the first phase of reading such a poem we want to see the speaker from her/his own position, accepting his/her moral views. To use the terminology of psychology, this means *empathy* with the speaker. This is the way we start to understand the speaker, but it is followed by a second phase, in which we see the speaker from the outside and form our own moral judgement of him/her. This, however, does not mean that we pass a final verdict on the character. One exciting feature of dramatic monologues is that they tend to leave questions (including moral dilemmas) open. This is Langbaum’s summary and conclusion:

In other words, judgment is largely psychologized and historicized. We adopt a man’s point of view of his age in order to judge him—which makes the judgment relative, limited in applicability to the particular conditions of the case. This is the kind of judgment we get in the dramatic monologue, which is for this reason an appropriate form for an empiricist and relativist age, an age which has come to consider value as an evolving thing dependent upon the changing individual and social requirements of the historical process. For such an age judgment can never be final, it has changed and will change again; it must be perpetually checked against fact, which comes before judgment and remains always more certain. (*The Poetry* 107-108)

Both in Chapter 2.4 and other parts of this study I will use these four terms, enlarge on them, and confront them with Larkin's principles and practice. At this point, I will summarize the previously outlined features of four types of poetry, which differ in the degree and character of the distance between the poet and the speaker. In *confessional poetry* the implied poet and the speaker are identical or nearly identical. Such texts are always autobiographical, and often fulfill the secularized function of confession. The point of view is always internal: in these poems the internal is projected into images; that is, externalized. In *dramatic lyrics* a natural object is represented, but it becomes symbolic in the images of the poem. The speaker and the implied poet are represented as the same persona but two different agents. Consequently, there are two points of view in such poems: an internal and an external one. In *mask lyrics* everything is symbolic. (One can think of the fog in Eliot's "Prufrock", the sea in Tennyson's "Ulysses", or the blue sky in Larkin's "High Windows".) When we read a mask lyric, we understand the speaker as a *projection* from the implied poet's consciousness. The speaker is always an artificial person, a mask through which the poet speaks to the reader. Finally, in *dramatic monologues* neither the characters (the speaker and the listener), nor the objects represented in the text are symbolic. A fictitious speaker addresses a fictitious listener. Both are created as simulations of reality. As opposed to the symbolic setting of mask lyrics, the setting of a dramatic monologue is natural; we take it literally (as with the Duke's gallery in Browning's "My Last Duchess", the painter's studio in "Andrea del Sarto" or in Duffy's "Standing Female Nude"). We understand the implied poet in terms of *contrast* with the speaker.

Obviously, there are no sharp division lines between these four forms; moreover, a number of poems can be read in terms of two or more of these types. To anticipate a suggestion in Chapter 2.4: these categories can be treated as figures of reading, not unlike autobiography in Paul de Man.

### 1.2. Larkin Studies: Biography versus Poetry

In a collection of essays edited by Stephen Regan (*Philip Larkin*, 1997) an underlying question is this: are we discussing the poem or the poet? Or, to ask the same question in Larkin's terms: are we more deceived or less deceived by the metonymy of the phrase "we are reading Larkin"? The overtly admitted purpose of the volume may be discussing and

assessing Larkin's poetry, but there are at least as many references to his letters (mainly published in *SL*) and to his life (mostly details that Motion has made widely known) as to the poems themselves.

Perhaps one should not be surprised. Larkin is known as a legend, and no critic can pretend to be unaware of this. One ought to add that Larkin may well turn out to be one of the last writers who constructed a life work of letters. These pieces of writing, balancing on the borderline between "Life" and "Art", will probably always be interesting not only for critics, but also for a wider reading public. There is every chance that this interest will be further increased by the publication of Larkin's letters to Monica Jones in 2010. The private letters draw one's attention not merely to the poet's life, but also to the romantic aspect of his personality: the author who first builds up his life, then projects it into poetry.

Although I will keep references to Larkin's life in this study to a minimum, I am not suggesting that the biography must by definition be outside the scope of Larkin criticism. Discussing Larkin's life is justifiable, since it helps us understand his poems, although in many cases it has also proven to be distorting or misleading. It is revealing that even those authors who overtly reject the methods of biographical criticism, such as John Osborne in *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence* in 2008, make use of the biography, at least to a certain extent.

In the centre of the book edited by Regan one finds a hilariously subversive essay: Graham Holderness's "Reading 'Deceptions'", a text balanced on the borderline between literary criticism and fiction. It offers four readings of Larkin's "Deceptions" by four fictitious characters in the same university department: a formalist, a Marxist, a feminist and a post-structuralist critic. Holderness's parodistic readings have a central position in the volume for precisely the same reason as Larkin's "Posterity" does in *High Windows*. In the first place, the poem entitles the reader to see Larkin through the eyes of Jake Balokowsky, his fictitious biographer, but Larkin also ridicules this young cosmopolitan scholar. Holderness's Cleanth, Raymond, Kate, and Colin are both serious and ludicrous. Holderness has created four possible scholars, and he does not say that any of them are wrong. He laughs at them, but does not reject their readings. In a Larkinesque manner, he wears the masks of four critics to demonstrate the diversity of Larkin criticism—in my reading also suggesting that the personae representing four meanings may be antagonistic, but the meanings are not. The plurality of readings helps, rather than hinders, our understanding of the poems.

In an earlier monograph (*Philip Larkin*, 1992), Regan outlines the main trends of Larkin criticism. In so doing, he identifies a watershed: "After 1974 [the publication of *High*

*Windows*] the critical response to Larkin's poetry shifted drastically; Larkin came to be seen as a much more provocative, disquieting and 'difficult' writer than previously, and critics began to perceive in his work the impact of European modernism and symbolism" (10). It is highly suggestive that in the collection Regan edited five years later, Andrew Motion's essay (previously entitled "The Poems" in his critical study on Larkin) is renamed as "Philip Larkin and Symbolism". In the same book, Seamus Heaney also points out that "there is something Yeatsian in the way that Larkin, in *High Windows*, places his sun poem immediately opposite and in answer to his moon poem" (24). In Barbara Everett's study ("Philip Larkin: After Symbolism") one finds ample evidence for the influence of French symbolism upon Larkin. This is particularly important since Larkin denied being in any way influenced by what came from abroad. Today we have every reason to see this as a legend that he created about himself.

The most significant point made by the two books by Regan is that whether one accepts the image of "provincial Larkin" or that of "modernist (even postmodernist) Larkin", it is equally significant to make a distinction between the poet and the persona in his poems. (My lenience towards using the biography should also be understood with this restriction.) He argues, furthermore, that a linguistic or stylistic approach is much more fruitful in the analysis of poetry in general, and Larkin's poems in particular, than a thematic one. Regan quotes some authors who maintain the view that Larkin's stylistic effects are based upon a combination of metaphoric (literary) and metonymic (colloquial) language. He, however, can fully accept the method based upon this stylistic distinction only if it analyses poetry in the context of the society in which it was written.

Similarly, Regan acknowledges the achievements of what he calls the "symbolist approach", since it points out the link between Larkin and (both French and English) symbolism, as, for example, Barbara Everett does in her previously mentioned essay. Again, however, he sees it as problematic that this approach tends to view literary trends outside their social context. Instead of the rejected methods, his ambition in the second part of his monograph is to offer "a more responsive and responsible *historicist criticism*" (59, emphasis in the original).

Regan does this by pointing out that "[t]here is a complex and distinctive relationship between the linguistic structure of the poems and the changing social structure of the post-war years" (100). Nobody can doubt this, but Regan's conclusion is somewhat surprising: he makes Larkin, a *par excellence* conservative poet, seem to be a rebellious critic of post-war capitalism. Moreover, although Regan admits that Larkin is not a "realistic" poet, he very

nearly makes him a Marxist writer by emphasizing his solidarity with the working class, which, according to him, is obviously present in Larkin's verse. Regan's view of Larkin is significant (and it gave inspiration to further readings of the poems), but if one takes it as an interpretation *replacing*, rather than amending, others (as Regan suggests), it narrows our horizon.

Political readings of Larkin are significant, but they should not elbow aside other, equally relevant, approaches. When Andrew McKeown and Charles Holdefer called for papers to be given at a conference entitled "Philip Larkin and the Poetics of Resistance" in 2004, the result was unexpected. The term resistance, recalling political contexts, was reinterpreted in a number of ways by the participants. After the papers had been published with the same title (2006), Graham Chesters wrote in a review:

What strikes one is the diversity of what resists or is being resisted. Larkin is claimed, for example, to resist translation, foreign languages in general, specific developments in English poetry, the academic prerequisites of poetry, time, the world, mass civilization, loss of traditional respect for rhyme, modernity, the War, conservative ideals with respect to sexual and social politics, unjust treatment, traditional modes of understanding, hostile attitudes towards the enemy, commercialization, aggressive and demeaning self-interest characteristic of the final decades of the twentieth century, Modernist fragmentation, the language of public discourse, and inarticulate middle-class prosperity. (26)<sup>2</sup>

In my reading, this gives evidence of Larkin's strong "resistance" to restricting the meanings of his poems. Political readings are always possible, but they are not always interesting and stimulating.

Although Regan's monograph has generated debates, his emphasis on "the fundamental assumption that writing and reading take place in history" and that the "horizon of possible meanings is determined by the conjuncture of two historical moments, the moment of writing and the moment of reading" (61), can surely be accepted. Another monograph applying the method of historicism, published fourteen years after Regan's is Stephen Cooper's *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer* (2004). Although Cooper's close readings are

---

<sup>2</sup> My own contribution to the volume (in accordance with the second part of this study) was about Larkin's resistance to time. Chesters suggests that my essay "probably would have gained through a firmer assertion of its own integrity, without the need to allow the theme to be tugged towards the central tenet" (27). I could not agree more.

perceptive, interpreting Larkin as a subversive writer also leaves some doubts. Reading the early prose fiction (including the unfinished *No for an Answer* and *A New World Symphony*) in a social context is important, but the danger is that it may blind us to other layers of meaning. The texts that Cooper discusses in detail also offer themselves to feminist, iconographic, and many other interpretations. If we only see “Sam’s penchant for driving fast” in *No for an Answer* as a sign of “the gathering pace of consumer-capitalism” (77), we will not notice the same signifier as a manifestation of masculine energy (the image of an extended penis), as the re-writing of Whitman’s and Marinetti’s imagery of modern vehicles, and so forth. Narrowing down the possible scope of meanings is particularly problematic when we intend to discuss the role of mask construction in Larkin. Sam in *No for an Answer* and John Kemp in *Jill* can surely be interpreted as self-portraits (more precisely: masks), not only because of the obvious autobiographical elements (pointed out by Cooper), but also because of the symbolism inherent in the texts. This symbolism directs our attention to the *complexity* of Larkin’s image-making. In his often quoted “Statement” he refers to “a composite and complex experience” (RW 79), which should be preserved in the poem; we must notice the two adjectives he uses. It follows from the nature of experience in Larkin’s poetics that the poem that preserves it can only be “composite and complex”. The same applies to our reading.

Cooper also suggests that we should re-evaluate Larkin’s early texts, and his discussion of *The North Ship* is particularly eye-opening. As all readers of Larkin will be aware, Cooper carries out this re-assessment against the poet himself. Of course, we do not need to pay attention to authorial intention, but one cannot completely ignore the poet’s own opinion about his juvenilia, especially if the critic’s ambition is to find the cohesive force in the life work. Larkin’s 1965 introduction to the new edition of *The North Ship* is also his text, a part of a larger whole, entering a dialogue with his own former poetry (and perhaps his own former self).

In the analysis of *The Whitsun Weddings* Cooper remarks: “Throughout his career, Larkin destabilized the very attitudes that his detractors accuse him of purveying” (169). Once again, Cooper uses one Larkin against the other. For example, in the discussion of “MCMXIV”, he considers the records of Larkin’s dream, treating them as evidence of his subversive tendency. He also mentions the poet’s own interpretation of the poem as a lament for an “irreplaceable world” (161). We never learn why we should believe the dreams (the unconscious) rather than Larkin’s text broadcast on the BBC (the voice of the conscious). This is particularly difficult to understand in the light of Cooper’s conclusion: “The poem is

ambivalent towards tradition, at once nostalgic and yet profoundly aware of the limitations of the securities of the past” (162). So it is, but Larkin’s consciousness of these controversies does not mean that they do not exist. On the contrary, the powerful representation of this knowledge makes him an outstanding poet. Cooper writes later in the book: “As in so many of Larkin’s poems, human understanding is the major oppressor and this is impossible to escape” (176). It is the task of Larkin’s “posterity” to re-read his poems to learn more about this aporia.

James Booth represents a different attitude and method in his two monographs and numerous essays on Larkin. The conclusion of “Why Larkin’s Poetry Gives Offence” is an attack both against Larkin’s “detractors” and those who speak for him on an ideological basis:

[...] Larkin is an existential vagrant, of no fixed ideological abode. His poetry raises its flag on behalf of no cause. It refuses to argue a case in favour of anything, whether it be Englishness, morality or God. Larkin offers only poetry. And for the moralists and the theologians this will never be enough. (18)

It goes without saying that such statements characterize the critic at least as much as they describe the poet. In his second book on Larkin, Booth makes it clear that his intention is “to focus on the poetry itself, rather than other elements in the poems, however interesting or important these may be” (2). But Booth also enters a debate with the author: Larkin repeatedly claimed that a poem should be a preserver of experience, something transparent, a text *meaning* something, not simply *being*, as we read in Archibald MacLeish’s “Ars Poetica”. Booth declares: “Poems are never transcriptions of life. The deepest lesson that lyric poetry teaches us is that experience cannot be transcribed. It can only, ever, be ‘freshly created’” (*Philip Larkin: The Poet’s Plight* 111). Although Larkin uses the term “transference” rather than “transcription” to define the path between experience and the poem, this laconic explanation is a part of James Booth’s, rather than Philip Larkin’s, poetics. Of course, this is not to suggest that Booth is not correct when he describes Larkin in the context of his own poetics. My aim in this study, however, will be to explore Larkin’s poetics.

Nevertheless, Booth’s contribution to debunking popular beliefs about Larkin is immense. In his first book he questions his provincialism (again, a myth fuelled by the poet himself): “Larkin is frequently termed a provincial writer, but his neutral and detached attitude towards place is in fact the opposite of provincial” (*Philip Larkin: Writer* 31). He challenges the consensus (also accepted by Regan and many other critics in the early nineties)

that Larkin wrote dramatic monologues or mask lyrics by claiming that his first-person lyrics do not create personae detached from the poet. However, the relationship between the speaker, the implied poet and the real poet is more complicated than stated in Booth's first book (as I hope I have demonstrated in the first sub-chapter of this introduction).

We may focus on the poems but, as I suggested previously, we cannot pretend not to know the author's life.<sup>3</sup> Larkin's life story entered the public domain once Andrew Motion's biography had been published in 1993. Motion carefully follows the details of the poet's life from "his whining mother and autocratic father" (35) to the memorial service in Westminster Abbey early in 1986 (524). Although he manages to remain the detached chronicler that his task requires, the reader can easily draw at least two important conclusions from the story related in more than five hundred pages. One is that Larkin's life was more eventful than legends have it; the other is that literary experiences played as important a role for him as the influence of non-literary inspiration. This latter implication seems to question a myth partly created by the poet himself.

The subtitle of the book is *A Writer's Life*. Motion has used ample evidence to prove that Larkin's life was really that of a writer. The essence of his personality is best grasped by Monica Jones in a letter quoted in the biography: "He cared a tenth as much about what happened around him as he did about what was happening inside him" (169). The main task of the biographer, therefore, is to point out seemingly insignificant details in a seemingly uneventful life. Motion has done an excellent job, but in a way he contradicts his own subtitle: the image of Larkin in this book shows further "lives" apart from that of the writer: the life of the jazz fan, of the lover, and that of the conscientious and imaginative librarian. Importantly, a number of the studies published on Larkin since Motion's biography came out focus on such "non-literary" aspects; suffice it to mention John Osborne's and Richard Palmer's monographs (both in 2008). The general background is probably the increasing importance of cultural studies, which views literature as one of many forms of culture.

Motion's book reinforces the notion of Larkin's poetry as "creative photography" (Kuby 154), and it points out the biographical elements in most of his major poems. Larkin wanted to colonize the totality of life, but he was also aware that the lack of something was the real fuel of his poetic activity; this is why, oddly enough, he "ensured that he possessed nothing entirely" (327), and this experience is richly represented in his poems. Although the

---

<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye has a point about this in *Anatomy of Criticism*: "The first and most striking unit of poetry larger than the individual poem is the total work of the man who wrote the poem. Biography will always be a part of criticism, and the biographer will naturally be interested in his subject's poetry as a personal document, recording his private dreams, associations, ambitions, and expressed or repressed desires" (110).



story as narrated by Motion is that of a life in which literature gradually became more and more central, the tension between Larkin's life and poetry is also shown in many ways.

As I briefly mentioned previously, John Osborne's monograph, *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence* (2008) is intended as a sharp attack against biographical readings. The basis of the new method Osborne offers is his firm conviction that use of the biography has done almost irreparable harm in Larkin criticism. Following the logic of his remarks in the introduction to the book, the reader will understand the general implication: the detrimental effect of the biographical method is a major problem in literary studies today.<sup>4</sup> Osborne's point is that the biography hides, rather than reveals, the aesthetic values of the texts. Contextualization is vitally important, but (as he suggests) the real context of a poem (or the whole life work of a poet) is not his/her private life. It is wider contexts that help us construct relevant readings of a text: the social setting and the infinite multitude of other texts (literary and non-literary). In many respects he echoes the principles of Regan and Cooper.

The methodology Osborne puts into practice shows two main features: a thoroughgoing close reading of Larkin's individual texts and his oeuvre as a whole on the one hand; and the creation of a link between the primary texts and poststructuralist literary criticism on the other. What he proposes is this: if we manage to get rid of the obsolete methods of "biographicalists", explore the ambiguities in the texts, and map the context of world literature, we have every hope of ending up with a more complex image of Larkin's life work. We are likely to break with at least three myths hindering a proper reception of Larkin: that of the little Englander, that of the simple-minded poet and that of the man who never read literature other than British. Once again, one should remember: these are all myths fuelled by Larkin himself (and, as mentioned previously, also refuted by a number of Osborne's predecessors).

The most important thesis of Osborne's argument is that Larkin's poetry is elliptical (as all poetry is, one might add). The ultimate meaning that a perceptive reader can construct when reading Larkin is usually the tension between two (or even more) contradictory meanings. Osborne offers examples of this in every chapter, giving evidence that Larkin's gender politics, social views and attitude towards Englishness are much more complex and

---

<sup>4</sup> One cannot help asking the question: if we accept Osborne's statement that "well over ninety per cent" of the scholarly texts about Larkin apply biography as the major context (25), what should one say when reading criticism on Ted Hughes or Sylvia Plath? The figure would probably be close to a hundred per cent. Of course, it is easy to see the danger that Osborne warns us against, and he has a good reason to do so. Nevertheless, the "ideal reader" studying Hughes's *Birthday Letters* without any knowledge of Hughes's and Plath's lives would probably lose something of the meaning. One may wonder: would s/he also gain something? The question is neither rhetorical nor ironic.

much less deplorable than the image constructed in a number of previous essays and books suggests. Consequently, the ellipses in Larkin's poetry contain the richest meaning. His silences are more meaningful than what he says, and the tension between what is spoken out and what is hidden between the lines leads to the paradoxes that Osborne emphasizes frequently. Apart from claiming that this is a central feature much neglected in Larkin studies, he also suggests that Larkin replaces existential choice with paradoxes to be faced (94). This contrast between Larkin and the existentialists sounds barely justifiable. Existentialism is also full of paradoxes; suffice it to remember Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (a book Larkin definitely has affinities with).

The two contexts Osborne uses are other texts and the social environment, while he makes every effort to carefully avoid the third context: Larkin's life. (He does not always manage: using the poet's private letters and the characterization of his parents are borderline cases, to say the least. But juxtaposing his date of birth with other major events to create an image of a modernist *annus mirabilis* is also applying a biographical fact to speculations about literary history.) Of course, it is easy to see and appreciate the value of the fight against restrictive readings. Reading in general (and reading poetry in particular) is, however, always gap-filling, that is, restriction in one way or another.

Osborne frequently fills in the gaps in Larkin's poems by constructing political correctness as a fundamental meaning in the poems. A telling example is his discussion of "Talking in Bed". As he says, guesses about the biographical context hide the openness of the poem, in which the gender and sexual orientation of speaker and listener are not specified (184-85). Debunking some rigid conventions in reading Larkin is to be applauded, but it is not difficult to see a danger here of replacing one dogma with another. Putting the statue of a champion of political correctness in place of a previous one representing narrow-minded parochialism and misogyny would not enrich our image of a major poet. Osborne does not do this, but the danger is there, particularly in those parts of the book where the author's tone is declarative and authoritative.

This assertiveness happens most often when he rejects "biographicalism". While he is certainly right when carefully distinguishing between the speaker and the actual poet, to completely separate the two raises questions. Of course, most poets since Robert Browning have counted on the reader's conscious awareness that the speaker of the poem and the real author are never identical, not even in confessional poetry. There are, however, significant differences between the Browning monologues and, for example, T. S. Eliot's or W. B. Yeats's mask lyrics. As I pointed out previously, whereas the former simulates reality and the

actual author creates the speaker as a character to be judged, the latter constructs masks which simultaneously hide and reveal the poet. In Larkin's poems the speaker is, more often than not, a mask. Larkin made contradictory statements about this: in an interview he said that he only wanted to be "himself" in the poem, and hated the idea that his readers would think otherwise (*FR* 23); elsewhere he declared that he intended to be different from himself in his poems (qtd. in Motion, *Philip Larkin*, Contemporary Writers ser. 74).

What Osborne writes about the context of nothingness as represented in Larkin reveals both the chief virtues and limitations of his method of contextualization. He is certainly right in pointing out that Larkin's notion of nothingness "has affinities with the limitless void of Taoism and Buddhism" (253). Yes, it does, but it also has affinities with Jean-Paul Sartre, John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", or John Betjeman's "Good-bye". One should remember that mapping possible subtexts and interfaces is a part of the critic's reading strategy. If we follow Osborne's logic, it is not the genesis of the poems and not direct influences that we should discuss: it is the way *we* read Larkin that is at stake. As Regan suggests (following Hans Robert Jauss), it is not only the historical context of writing the poem that determines its reading but also the historical context of reading (Jauss's horizon of expectation). Different readers will find different analogies relevant.

After Regan's image of the progressive, left-wing poet, Cooper's subversive writer, and Booth's champion of pure poetry (and many other notions), Osborne has offered an image of the great liberal poet. Almost all of his observations and arguments support this image, and (using Lyotard's definition) he concludes that Larkin is a postmodernist "*sensu stricto*" (259). This is a radically new reading of Larkin, which needs to be addressed (although the main topic of the present study is not Larkin's place within the paradigm of literary history).

In a short monograph published eleven years before Osborne's book, Laurence Lerner argued: "Postmodern poetic theory often claims that the true subject of poetry is language itself, and particularly its unreliability. Larkin's traditional, language-loving poems are a refutation of this theory" (*Philip Larkin* 14). Then he points out that one of his major poems, "Maiden Name", is both a confirmation and a refutation of this theory. There is more to it than the woman exchanging "one signifier freighted with social meaning for another", as Osborne writes (228). The implied poet is horrified by the topsy-turvy world in which the two constituents of the linguistic sign as described by Ferdinand de Saussure change places. Larkin is undoubtedly fully aware of the post-modern world we live in, and this is richly represented in his texts. But the technique he uses to describe this world often seems to be anti-modernist, as "Maiden Name" and many other poems show. This practice is confirmed

by his sarcastic attacks against the modernists, which should not be neglected even if Osborne is right in referring to other texts pointing in different directions. It is another question whether Larkin's anti-modernism can still come under the umbrella term of postmodernism (rather than being a "reductive" label as Osborne suggests [52]). In my reading, Larkin is a postmodernist *sensu lato* rather than *sensu stricto*. This may be close to the other suggestion that Osborne offers on the same page where he made the point quoted about Larkin's postmodernism: Larkin is "a Postmodernist in Realist clothing—or, at the least, a Realist with Postmodernist sensibility" (259).

Richard Palmer's monograph, *Such Deliberate Disguises* (2008) consists of three sections signifying the three major fields of Larkin's talent and activity: the first is about the jazz critic, the second about the poet, and the third of the librarian. Although the last of these is disproportionately short (and does not offer much to say about Larkin's professionalism), the tripartite structure challenges the title of Motion's biography: Larkin's life was not merely "a writer's life": Palmer suggests that we should see the three spheres as three parts of a whole rather than conflicting sides of the same person. (As I mentioned previously: Motion's own text also suggests this, forming a contrast with the title.)

Discussing his attitude to Modernism, the book touches upon some central questions of Larkin studies, the first of these being whether he was an anti-modernist, a neo-modernist, or a post-modernist. Unlike Osborne, Palmer does not claim that Larkin was a post-modernist, but refuses to interpret him as an anti-modernist. He suggests that a poet who wrote that the unconscious "has a new need, and has produced a new art to satisfy that need, and it is as well that we should understand" cannot be an anti-modernist; moreover, this "sentence alone is enough to dispel any notion" of this kind (7). I am not sure that it really is "enough". Larkin's interest in the unconscious and his enthusiasm for Freud and psychoanalysis in his formative years is really important, and it does make for some *similarity* between him and the modernists (particularly D. H. Lawrence). Since he had no conceptualized theory, perhaps what he wrote of W. H. Auden only a week after the senior poet's death is also true of him: "What an odd dichotomy—English Auden, American Auden; pre-war Auden, post-war Auden; political Auden, religious Auden; good Auden, bad Auden..." (SL 489). Larkin was not the kind of Protean poet as Auden is often seen; still, *mutatis mutandis*, many readers could see a modernist Larkin as well as an anti-modernist one.

One of the virtues of the monograph is Palmer's attentive reading. Not only does he celebrate Larkin for his care for detail (in all the three fields he discusses) but also follows his example. He always finds support in Larkin's essays; as he says twice, "he was a formidable

theoretician of his own work” (XV, 76). I find this idea and the close readings in support of it a significant contribution to Larkin criticism. It looks behind the disguise of “timidity, cultural ignorance and witty self-deprecation” (76). Larkin’s concept of poetics is frequently ignored—not only because his “theory” is scattered in casual remarks, but also because these remarks often contradict each other. Nevertheless, his life work is based on the solid ground of his principles; this is a firm and well argued conviction in Palmer’s study (although his aim is not to discuss how these principles construct Larkin’s virtual poetics). The book shows not only his enthusiasm and erudition but also implies that there is still much to explore and consider: “The more one studies his *obiter dicta*, the more disingenuous, deceptive or even perverse Larkin can appear” (83).

As mentioned previously, Larkin still embarrasses his readers with his remarks on his own first-person lyrics. Palmer quotes him: “Don’t confuse me with the poems: I’m bigger than they are”; and comments: “Maybe so, but the assertion is palindromic: as works of art whose appeal is timeless, the poems are immeasurably more important” (84). Larkin’s sentence is “palindromic” in a different sense, too: isn’t it he who confuses the readers by “pretending to be himself” and his preference for non-metaphorical language? Marion Shaw’s anecdote added as an endnote to the written version of a lecture on Tennyson and Larkin offers an excellent example. When she made the point that in Larkin’s “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” the once beloved woman is “in a kind of death of the past” (23), “a lady in the audience said, ‘No, she isn’t. I’m her and I’m here now’” (26). It cannot be easy to become a trope in a poem, let alone dying metaphorically. But Palmer is right: this is “immeasurably more important” to us, readers of Larkin, than Winifred Arnott’s otherwise fascinating remark.

The most important context for Larkin is the Movement. In 1956 Robert Conquest edited and published an anthology of poems entitled *New Lines*. Today all readers of poetry in English think of this book as a milestone. Although most of the nine poets included had been publishing poetry for at least a decade by the mid-fifties, this was the first time an editor manifested that they belonged together. It is a commonplace to say that the Movement was the celebrated mainstream poetry of the fifties and the sixties in Britain. When Blake Morrison published his monograph entitled *The Movement* (1980), he gave it the subtitle *English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*. Those authors who wanted to demonstrate their difference also used Movement poetry in their identification and self-definition. This is what they intended to be different from; it is telling that the counter-anthology published in 1957 was entitled *Mavericks*, with significant poets such as Dannie Abse and Jon Silkin. Today we

can study the literature of the period with the benefit of the perspective offered by half a century. Many readers would be surprised to see that if they re-read some Movement poems and some Maverick texts, the differences are not at all striking. One reason is that the ambition of both parties was simply to write poetry of a high standard (and both succeeded in their highest achievements). Another, even more obvious, reason is that the really heated debate was going on in the criticism and (even more so) in the private letters of the era. Many of these letters are available and widely quoted now. Since further collections of such texts are being edited (such as Larkin's letters to Monica Jones, mentioned previously), it is expected that the re-evaluation of the Movement has not at all finished, and our knowledge of it will be enriched in the future.

A recent collection of essays, *The Movement Reconsidered* (edited by Zachary Leader, 2009) demonstrates how former views of the Movement have changed in the past fifty years. Morrison, who was rather critical of the Movement in his 1980 study, believes that any values we attribute to this trend depend on the individuals: "The Movement survives because Larkin and Amis in particular have left us with an indispensable body of literature—indispensable to our pleasure and understanding of the world, but indispensable too in its realism, honesty, and even courage" (17). This anticipates a *Leitmotif* in the volume, echoed, for example in Clive Wilmer's essay: "the Movement would have made no impact if the poems written under its banner had not included some great ones" (225).

In his previous book Morrison emphasized the anti-romantic and anti-modernist attitude of these poets and added: "They believed—and other critics have since come to share this view—that Modernism was a development out of, rather than a departure from, Romanticism" (*The Movement* 155). He still thinks that anti-Modernism was a key element in the Movement, and sees four arguments: the rejection of modernist elitism on a *social* ground; refusing to identify with the far right ideas that some modernists sympathized with, for *political* reasons; defending the *patriotic* "English line" against cosmopolitan tendencies; and "most crucially, was the *aesthetic* objection, that Modernism broke the contract between the poet and his audience" ("Still Going on" 20, emphasis added). "Most crucially" in the sense that the Movement was more significant in its aesthetic self-definition and innovations than in a social, political, or national context. This is a reiteration of what he wrote thirty years ago.

His assessment of Movement neutrality changed more markedly after 1980. He makes the reason clear in the concluding paragraph of the essay: "not just because times have changed but because I have" (33). His reading of Donald Davie's famous poem, "Creon's Mouse", celebrating the politics of non-intervention and non-conviction is revealing: he sees

this attitude as “courageous in the extreme” (33). Even more significantly, he discerns the consequences in poetics: Larkin’s blue sky is “a prejudice-free zone; a space for exploring ideas and feelings, for entertaining doubts and mysteries, without any irritable reaching after fact or finality” (32). It is not without reason that in the next sentence he refers to Keats’s Negative Capability: his words are a rephrasing of the romantic poet’s well-known definition of the term in the famous Letter 32 written to his brother on 21 December 1817. Larkin, the most outstanding Movement poet, may have sounded hostile to Keats in his private letters, but he was following in his wake, as Michael O’Neill’s essay in the same volume also testifies (289).

If the image of the empty sky at the end of “High Windows” represents a neutral and “prejudice-free” space to Morrison, it appears to mean something completely different in Nicholas Jenkins’s reading. In his comparative study of Auden and Larkin he discusses a radically new meaning of the sky in 20<sup>th</sup>-century imagery, caused by aviation and the constant threat of bombers occupying the space that was formerly identified as heaven. Consequently, he suggests, “Larkin’s contemplated sky is a boundary, an emptiness, a mysterious vacancy, a border” (40). Jenkins’s essay is eye-opening and stimulating; nevertheless, his historical reading seems to be more applicable to Auden (in poems such as “Musée des Beaux Arts”) than to Larkin. More precisely: seeing the sky as a place of threat, hell instead of heaven, is one possible meaning, which does not eliminate previous readings of his texts, particularly those of “High Windows”.

Larkin’s poetry is highly ambiguous and thought-provoking: the most profound meaning of his texts can be constructed on the strength of the tension between two (or more) possible meanings, as John Osborne also pointed out by demonstrating how significant ellipsis was in his poems. Deborah Bowman writes in her essay on William Empson and Larkin in *The Movement Reconsidered*: “Empson’s ambiguity, as Larkin understands, is not merely an enumeration of different meanings, but a product of the ways in which these meanings interfere with and impinge upon one another” (168). All readers of Larkin should remember this, since this is a guiding principle in his poetics. Nicholas Jenkins’s interpretation of “High Windows” in the context of 20<sup>th</sup>-century military history, Larkin’s personal experience of the Second World War, and Auden’s poetry is perfectly legitimate. But so is reading the same poem against the background of Mallarmé (particularly “Les Fenêtres”) and the transcendentalism of French symbolist poetry. Needless to say, the two possible meanings, the sky as hell and the sky as heaven, add up to a third meaning, and that is the point of the poem. Larkin writes: “Rather than words comes the thought of high windows”

(*Collected Poems* 165). Language stops and stands still on the threshold of the unknown, whether it is heaven or hell. It is in this space that writing poetry becomes possible, and one cannot help recalling Morrison's suggestion just a few pages before. Different readers reconsider the Movement differently, and the essays of the book are in a dialogic relationship.

Larkin, perhaps the most clearly agnostic of all 20<sup>th</sup>-century poets, kept on emphasizing the boundaries of human cognition. Craig Raine also writes on this in his essay; in "Dublinesque", for example, he points out the representation of "the frontiers of consciousness" (64). He mentions the repeated use of the phrase "as if", which illustrates these frontiers; one could also refer to the word "almost" in "An Arundel Tomb" or "The Trees". We almost know the world we live in, but not quite. We are human beings; therefore, we want to understand it. Raine makes efforts to perceive more of it than we do in everyday life in his own poetry by introducing new and surprising points of view. Larkin went a different way: although he is fully aware that language is unreliable, he pretends to trust it; this is perhaps the most profound element of his constant role playing. (To refer to Bowman's excellent essay once again: "Larkin's poems are both calm and exasperated because they don't articulate any frustration that words cannot adequately express feelings or ideas; what they articulate is the frustration that lives cannot adequately accommodate desires" [174-75].) By writing poetry in seemingly conventional forms, he wants to understand the nature of time. Raine discusses this in "Reference Back" and "An Arundel Tomb".

At the end of his essay Raine mentions A. E. Housman as an analogy and point of reference to demonstrate Larkin's dual attitude: "The prose and the passion coarsely connected—as they are in life, always" (78). Most of the other texts in the book also contextualize the Movement authors. Terry Castle reads Larkin's lesbian texts in the context of popular schoolgirl fiction, and Deborah Cameron writes about the question of language. As she claims: "the Movement writers shared, and in some cases articulated very powerfully, an important subset of mid-twentieth-century concerns about language" (141). It may be a "subset", but in Larkin's life-work this is of central importance. Cameron only mentions him as a linguistic "chameleon" (again, a phrase made popular by Keats, as a metaphor for the poet), which is a relevant side of his style. But Larkin also wrote *about* language; we can find evidence in his fiction of contrasting registers (upper middle class and working class in *Jill*, English and a significantly unidentified foreign language in *A Girl in Winter*), and his poetry asks questions of the reliability of language. The clearest example of this is "Maiden Name" but the inability to speak about death is also one of the most important undercurrents of his



verse (“Nothing To Be Said”, “Dockery and Son”, “Aubade”). Self-reflexivity and the competence to write about language are not privileges of the modernists.

Instead of asking the question—again—whether Larkin was a modernist or an anti-modernist, I will attempt to explore how he constructed his own poetics in an age of postmodernism.

## **2. Larkin's Principles of Writing Poetry**

## 2.1. Experience and the Tradition of the “English Line”

Philip Larkin’s texts are usually read as representatives of 20<sup>th</sup>-century provincialism or “the English line”, but (as mentioned in the Introduction) his poetry has also been interpreted in the context of modernism, postmodernism, and even post-colonialism. Ian Gregson’s summary is a good example of how recent literary criticism has tried to contextualize Larkin within the paradigm of literary history:

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he evolved a poetic whose first concern was to establish a consensus with his readers based on shared experience—but that this poetic evolved through a dialogue with modernism can be seen clearly in his most important poem, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ [...] This amounts to a realist rereading of *The Waste Land*’s fertility metaphor. (19)

The frequently discussed closure Gregson refers to puts an end to the protagonist’s long train journey:

We slowed again,  
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled  
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower  
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.  
(CP 116)

Gregson also suggests that far from carefully avoiding modernist poetry, Larkin incorporated it “into an English realist world-view”, that is, he entered into “a conservative dialogue with modernism” (27). A dialogue suggests a shared experience: that of sharing thoughts. Ideally, it results in a complexity of ideas and feelings constructed on the basis of interacting opposites. In the last lines of “The Whitsun Weddings” he nods to Eliot. In a letter giving instructions to a radio performance Larkin wrote: “Success or failure of the poem depends on whether it gets off the ground on the last two lines” (SL 301). It will be noticed that Larkin uses a simile, rather than a metaphor, in the closure. Sensing the end of the train journey is “*like* an arrow-shower [...] becoming rain.” The dialogue with Eliot’s *Waste Land* takes the shape of a simile: a figure of speech that emphasizes the possibility of comparison, but also a lack of identity. This trope is perhaps the most obvious sign of Bakhtinian heteroglossia in

Larkin's poetry. To cite two further poems: the persona of "Coming" (CP 33) feels "*like* a child" (without necessarily sharing the child's happiness); the poet implied in "The Trees" hears a faint message "*like* something almost being said" (CP 166, emphases added). The allegedly anti-romantic and anti-modernist poet keeps up the dialogue with his modernist and romantic predecessors. Similes construct a notion of continuity, but also that of distinct entities, and are at least as important in Larkin's poetry as metonymy, the figure he is most frequently associated with (see Lodge, "Philip Larkin: the Metonymic Muse").

### 2.1.1. Experience in the "Statement"

The same duality can be discerned in Larkin's attitude towards his readers. When he insisted that his poems did not require any scholarly interpretation, and they should only be read and taken at their face value, he was not simply playing the role of the anti-intellectual poet. His goal was to create intimacy between himself and the reader, more precisely, between the implied author (Larkin playing the role of Larkin in the poem) and the implied reader, while also respecting the distinction and distance between them. He had the ambition to write the kind of poetry that could make a bridge between author and reader, but he was also aware that the poem could easily become a barrier between the two sides; this is why writing valuable poetry needs special effort. In a book review he wrote: "To me, now as at any other time, poetry should begin with emotion in the poet, and end with the same emotion in the reader. The poem is simply the instrument of transference" (FR 65). This ambition to enable the reader to relive the situation of the poet is one aspect of Larkin's credo most concisely summed up in his frequently quoted "Statement" in 1955:

I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art. (RW 79)<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In the first chapter of *Purity of Diction* Donald Davie makes a list of what a poet is *responsible* to. Since Davie's book was first published in 1952 and Larkin's "Statement" in 1955, it is possible that Larkin's declaration came as a response.

What does Larkin mean by the word “experience”? In this declaration it is a key word but, according to R. J. C. Watt’s concordance, in his poetry he uses it only twice, in two early poems: “After-Dinner Remarks” and “A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb”. In the former he writes about experiencing emotion, in the latter about rebuilding experience. As I will attempt to demonstrate later, both are significant aspects of Larkin’s credo.

On the basis of the two poems and the “Statement”, what Larkin means is no doubt “shared experience”, to use Gregson’s phrase. But it becomes “shared” only when the poet creates a text. In an interview Larkin said: when you write a poem, “you’re trying to preserve something. Not for yourself, but for the people who haven’t seen it or heard it or experienced it” (*RW* 52). In other words, shared experience is not the subject matter of his poetry: it is the poem itself. When somebody asked him what exactly it was that he intended to preserve in his poems, he replied: “as I said, the experience. The beauty” (*RW* 68). The first *OED* meaning<sup>2</sup> of beauty is “Such combined perfection of form and charm of colouring as affords keen pleasure to the sense of sight”, to which the second meaning adds: also “to other senses”. Enabling the reader to relive the poet’s personal experience of beauty as something “affording keen pleasure” (conventionally regarded as the highest aesthetic quality) is certainly significant in Larkin’s method of composition.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Wordsworth’s ideal that a poet should be “a man speaking to men” (937) is very much in the background of Larkin’s credo, for all his anti-romantic tendencies.

The duality of preserving the values of poets and cultural conventions from earlier ages and rebelling against them is a much-debated dilemma in Larkin criticism. In a stimulating essay V. Penelope Pelizzon interprets the ambiguity of challenging and preserving as a possible version of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque: “Evaluating Larkin’s work in relation to the carnivalesque demonstrates that his desire simultaneously to challenge *and* preserve social custom is a vital aspect of his complex, regenerative relation to ritual and tradition” (223, emphasis in the original). Pelizzon’s suggestion is a fascinating and desperate attempt to read Larkin in the carnivalesque tradition, but it leaves some doubts. Although some of Bakhtin’s terms, such as heteroglossia and polyphony can conveniently be applied to Larkin’s life work, carnival in the Bakhtinian sense is not represented, and the carnivalesque is not constructed. Bakhtin’s category includes not only death, but also rebirth; that is, victory over death. In Larkin, however, death is more often triumphant than not. In his late poem, “Aubade”, he

---

<sup>2</sup> Larkin’s poetics and poetry would resist the application of any philosopher’s accurate definition of the beautiful. The meaning in colloquial language as rendered by *OED* is more helpful.

<sup>3</sup> I will enlarge on Larkin’s distinction between beauty and truth in experience in the next chapter.

writes: “Death is no different whined at than withstood” (*CP* 209); the well-known aphorism of “Dockery and Son” warns us by concluding: “Life is first boredom, then fear” (*CP* 153). Laughter, a central element of carnivalesque literature, is not even alluded to. Death can brag in Larkin’s poetry; his protagonists are not mock-kings (as they would be in a real carnival). One of his innovations is that he represents life from the perspective of death, without the consolation of afterlife or an alternative life offered by carnivalesque comedy.

Therefore, Larkin’s remark that he is trying to preserve experience “for its own sake” should be taken seriously. He cannot find anything beyond material existence, apart from nothingness, as he suggests in a number of poems (such as “Here”, “Nothing To Be Said” and “High Windows”). The absence he represents<sup>4</sup> contains transcendence and nostalgia for pure spiritual values, but he is far from the transcendentalism of the French symbolists and T. S. Eliot’s modernism.

As a result, Larkin provoked sharp attacks shortly after the publication of his first major volume, *The Less Deceived* (1955) and the anthology entitled *New Lines* (1956). This is what Charles Tomlinson wrote in a review in 1957:

My own difficulty with his poetry is that, while I can see Mr. Larkin’s achievement is, within its limits, a creditable one, I cannot escape from the feeling of its intense parochialism. [...] Further, one can only deplore Mr. Larkin’s refusal to note what had been done before 1890 in the ironic self-deprecating vein by Laforgue and Corbière and to take his bearings accordingly. But the modern Englishman is astonishingly provincial and Mr. Larkin (as he tells us) has ‘no belief in “tradition”’: ‘I believe,’ he writes in *Poets of the 1950s*, ‘that every poem must be its own sole freshly-created universe.’ And this forty years after ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. (214)

Larkin’s “Statement” really contains a sentence that is a provocative attack against Eliot:

As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in ‘tradition’ or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people. (*RW* 79)

---

<sup>4</sup> For further details about images of absence in Larkin see Chapter 2.6.

I find it important that Larkin uses the word “tradition” within quotation marks. The implication is that it is not tradition itself that he rejects; it would be illogical anyway, since his main ambition is to preserve values. What he rejects is the cult of tradition, the trend called traditionalism, and Eliot’s principle of intertextuality. Moreover, I suggest that he probably accepted some of the ideas in Eliot’s essay. He could not have found anything unacceptable in this passage:

[Tradition] cannot be inherited. [...] It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year [...]. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. (*Selected Prose* 22-23)

Tradition is also important for Larkin, and he also views it as a dynamically developing part of the present. (As I will point out later, the peculiar definitions of the term as used by Eliot and Larkin are significantly different. Now I am referring to tradition in the general sense as the *OED* defines it: “The action of transmitting or ‘handing down’, or fact of being handed down, from one to another, or from generation to generation...”) His attitude to Eliot’s programme of impersonality is much more ambivalent. He rejected the modernist credo that is best summarized in this aphoristic passage in Eliot’s essay: “What happens is a continual surrender of himself [the poet] as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (*Selected Prose* 25). This is the exact opposite of Larkin’s basic principles. As R. J. C. Watt recalls, Larkin introduced a public reading of his poetry by pointing out that all his poems were about personal experience (“ ‘Scragged by embryo-Leavises’ ” 174).

What he shares with his readers *as a poet* is his *personal* experience, even though the position he constructs is determined by the duality of participation and detachment. As Hugh Underhill has pointed out, Larkin’s personae are distanced from the people they observe without assuming a superior position (183-193). His poetry gives evidence that keeping a distance is a centrally important element of his method of composition. In most cases the experience is gained by an *observer*. Larkin, however, never conceptualized this principle.

Inasmuch as Larkin had no systematic theory, he was definitely the opposite of Eliot, the poet who based his poetry on the firm ground of his literary essays. Eliot is the prototype of the modern intellectual poet; Larkin is the anti-intellectual poet *par excellence*. In his scattered remarks, he did not refer to the rhetorical structure of the poem; not simply because he kept a distance from post-structuralist criticism, but mainly because he did not think of the reader as a student or a disciple. As quoted previously, he conceived of the poem as “the instrument of transference” (*FR* 65). His position, therefore, is fundamentally different from that of the modernists and neo-modernists. In an essay on Donald Davie, William H. Pritchard writes that “Davie is on the side of those Americans, and the Englishman, Bunting, who share the ‘wholesome conviction’ ‘that a poem is a transaction between the poet and his subject more than it is a transaction between the poet and his reader’” (240). Davie and Basil Bunting conceived of the ideal reader as an overhearer. Larkin, on the other hand, intended to *share* his private experience with the reader, and the emphasis is on the verb. Because of Larkin’s stress on experience this is sometimes overlooked, although one should not miss the gesture of bringing a gift to the reader in his poetics.

### 2.1.2. *The Two Stages of Composition*

In a radio programme Larkin made the idea of bringing a gift to the reader explicit:

You try to create something in words that will reproduce in somebody else who never met you and perhaps isn’t even living in the same cultural society as yourself, that somebody else will read and so get the experience that you had and that forced you to write the poem. It’s a kind of preservation by re-creation, if I can put it that way. (*FR* 106)

Elsewhere, he analyzed his own method of composition as a process consisting of two stages:

[First, the poet should have] a feeling that you are the only one to have noticed something, something especially beautiful or sad or significant. Then, there follows a sense of responsibility, responsibility for preserving this remarkable thing by means of a verbal device that will set off the same experience, so that they too will feel *How*



*beautiful, how significant, how sad*, and the experience will be preserved. (FR 78, emphasis in the original)

In other words, preserving experience is only possible with the reader: s/he is the medium where it will resurrect, and it is only possible by reliving something that first happened to the poet. A poem is successful if this act of preserving through reliving takes place. Larkin's reader, therefore, is an active participant rather than a passive observer (forming a poignant contrast with most of the personae in the poems).

In the previous quotation Larkin distinguished between two stages: experiencing something and putting it into words. Since in further essays (such as "The Pleasure Principle" and "Writing Poems") he describes the second stage as finding the adequate verbal devices, he suggests that experience is something non-verbal by definition. This is reinforced by his remark that "writing a poem is still not an act of the will" (RW 84): when he starts composing the text (which is inevitably verbal), the motivation is still non-verbal.

This careful distinction between the verbal and the non-verbal suggests that to Larkin the problem of language was as important as it was to the modernists and the postmodernists. It is well known that Eliot's verse can be read as the poetry of communication: the possibility and impossibility of using language. The opening poem of the Eliot canon, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", is a love song that is never sung. Prufrock cannot communicate, but the poet can, and he does so through the mask of Prufrock. Speaking about the impossibility of speaking is a central paradox in Eliot, which can be observed in a number of his texts from the early poems to his last achievement, the *Four Quartets*.

Larkin's interest in human signs is no less intense. His two completed novels, *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*, are about language as a means of construction and of alienation (Bradford 75). Larkin was an anti-modernist poet who was fully aware of the post-modern world that he was living in. He was conscious that as a poet he needed to speak about something that cannot be put into words (since experience is non-verbal by definition). He admitted that a vision is more valuable than words ("High Windows"), and suggested that those who know something essential will never talk about it ("Nothing To Be Said"). He knew that language was unreliable, but he played a game pretending that language was to be trusted. In "Maiden Name" he suggested that the signified and the signifier can swap places, and an important understatement of the poem is that erotic love is a verbal construct. (The way Larkin represents eroticism and sexuality offers interfaces with Foucault's analyses in *The History of Sexuality*.) Furthermore, in his animal poems ("At Grass", "The Mower", etc.) he suggests

that communication between humans and animals is impossible, but we pretend that it is not. Likewise, in “The Old Fools” he says: we will find out what is in the minds of old people suffering from dementia when we are old fools ourselves, but then we will not be able to speak about it. One day we will know the answer to the question—but then we will not remember the question itself. The world cannot be described in the reassuring form of catechism: questions and answers do not match. Speaking to each other is impossible, because we are also unable to speak to ourselves.

One consequence is that dialogues are less and less frequent in Larkin if we read his works in chronological order. In the early texts (his fiction and private letters) conversations (including the satirical form of dramatizing his inner conflict) are common. In his major volumes, poems such as “Mr Bleaney” and “Dockery and Son” are symptomatic. In both poems, there is a marked lack of any answer to the opening words of a fictitious character. In a later text, “Posterity”, again, the protagonist is speaking to a mute listener, while the subject matter of the monologue (the poet as fiction) cannot enter into the conversation. Paradoxically, the construction of such silent characters maintains dialogicity at a deeper level, particularly since such characters are always metonymies of the unknown reader as well as of the implied poet.

In a letter to John Shakespeare, Larkin makes a significant comment on his “Statement”:

I feel it [poetry] is a kind of permanent communication better called preservation, since one’s deepest impulse in writing (or, I must admit, painting or composing) is to my mind not ‘I must tell everybody about that’ (i.e. responsibility to other people) but ‘I must stop from being forgotten if I can’ (i.e. responsibility toward subject). [...] the distinction between communication and preservation is one of motive, and I think the latter word gives a very proper emphasis to the language-as-preserver rather than language-as-means-of-communication. (John Shakespeare 13)

By insisting that preservation is his guiding principle Larkin chooses mimesis as a function: what is important is not the poem but what is in the poem. This is why he rejected Eliot’s and Tomlinson’s poetics. Although “the responsibility toward subject” could serve as common denomination for Larkin and the modernists, the big difference is that in Larkin’s view this responsibility is *for the sake of the reader*. Consequently, as Richard Bradford writes: “Larkin’s principal point was that the notion of poetry as fulfilling some kind of duty to an

abstract notion of formal radicalism meant that its focus would be shifted disastrously from its carefully shaped message to its shape” (144). This is why the “shape” of his poems (in the sense Coleridge uses the term, as opposed to “form”) is conventional, but highly sophisticated. However, it does not mean treating language as a transparent system. Since “language-as-presenter” is the real protagonist and author of the poems, whose aim is *not* to communicate, there will always be more in the poem than the mechanical reflection of the experience. It will be noticed that Larkin uses the word “transference” when describing the process of enabling the reader to relive his experience. Whereas “communication” is rooted in language, the implication of Larkin’s text is that transference is concerned with the non-verbal aspect of experience.

But experience is as complex and problematic as the language that will preserve it. After re-reading Larkin’s revised version of his character-sketch, John Shakespeare asks the tentative question: “Is it too fanciful to see [...] Larkin labouring to create his own version of his life and work almost as if he were constructing a poem?” (15) The question is rhetorical: the most important primary experience for Larkin, his own life, is something *constructed*, but non-verbal. So are other forms of experience.

It follows from his notion of experience as a constructed entity that Larkin’s solution to the problem of alienation and the impossibility of communication is in art. As the quotation from his “Statement” demonstrates, he was against “casual allusions” to works of art in poetry and, indeed, the idea of ekphrasis is very far from his poetics. Or at least so it seems. He seldom made it explicit that a text he wrote was about one particular work of art. (For example, very few of his titles or subtitles contain the name of an artist or the title of a work of art; two notable exceptions are “The Card Players” with its allusion to Cézanne and “For Sidney Bechet” referring to a jazz musician.) He wanted his own verse to appear different from the kind of poetry that is about paintings, statues and other artefacts; he definitely intended to deviate from Keats, Yeats, Eliot, later the Group poets of the sixties, etc. Nevertheless, when he condemned the three infamous “P’s”, Pound, Picasso and Charlie Parker in an essay, he revealed that he knew them, and implied that he could have named his heroes in poetry, painting and jazz music. Some of his poems were inspired by documentary films (“At Grass”, “Faith Healing”), actually works of visual art; his major poem “The Card Players” is based on the experience of observing Dutch paintings and Cézanne’s pictures with the same title. Art was not only important to him, but also an alternative to real life in which we are frustrated by the barrier of language.

This is why Nicholas Marsh's observation is thought-provoking but slightly misleading: "It is possible that Larkin was less than frank when he suggested that a poem might 'preserve ... an experience ... from oblivion'. He may have enjoyed portraying himself as the poet who captures the moment, but it is not true" (30). Larkin, no doubt, was playing a role when making this statement (just as he did in his poetry). But experience is an umbrella term: it includes purely mental experience, which also needs to be preserved from oblivion. This way, a "crafted" poem may meet his criteria. In my reading, the "Statement" makes a point about preserving, not about the nature of experience. As I have pointed out, Larkin enlarged on this latter concept in other essays, letters and interviews, which imply that experience itself is something constructed. Far from portraying himself as a poet of the passing moment, he suggests that experience to him means something more solid and complex. However, he is aware that experience always needs the artificial intervention of the human mind if we want to keep it from oblivion.<sup>5</sup>

Enjoying works of art is an experience carrying the promise of long-lasting values. Marsh has noticed that in *The Less Deceived* Larkin published some poems in which art appears to be a substitute for sex ("Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album", "Reasons for Attendance"). He draws the conclusion: Larkin "seeks to preserve something, but in an idealised and dehumanised form" (146-147). This may form the basis of a Freudian reading of Larkin's "Statement": preserving means sublimation. If we put it to the test of the life work, we can find justification both at the beginning and at the end of the career. In Larkin's first mature poem, "Waiting for Breakfast", he describes how he needs to choose between two women figures: the real partner and the muse of poetry. He chose the muse, and towards the end of his career he concluded: the other option "never worked" for him because of the "arrogant eternity" poetry offered (*CP* 215). As he said in an interview: "I didn't choose poetry: poetry chose me" (*RW* 62). His subjectivity had to obey the energy arising from the interplay between his id and his superego, which imposed the technique of sublimation on him. It was this "choice" that inevitably led to the ideal of the autonomous poem, but it was also related to his *Angst*.

In a radio programme he commented: "I sometimes think that the most successful poems are those in which subjects appear to float free from the preoccupations that chose

---

<sup>5</sup> James Booth interprets Larkin as an elegiac poet, and suggests: "In the traditional *carpe diem* poem the passing of time is an argument for action. In Larkin's anti-*carpe-diem* poem what is seized, instead, is the elegiac poignancy of the past moment" (*Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight* 70, emphases in the original). Although Booth makes this remark about "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album", it seems to be a general feature in Larkin.

them, and to exist in their own right, reassembled—one hopes—in the eternity of imagination” (*FR* 79). More than in any of the previous quotations, Larkin insists that experience (“subject”) is, ideally, independent both from the subjectivity of the poet and language. To find the space for it in a non-linguistic universe, he coins the surprising phrase: “the eternity of imagination”. If this is what all readers share with the poet, the term is probably a version of Jung’s collective unconscious, even though Larkin rejects the idea of treating myths as the manifestations of what all human beings share. This notion of how poetry works leaves at least two questions open.

First, if, on the one hand, experience should remain intact in the poem and, on the other hand, the author’s act of “reassembling” means selection, what is it that prevents the poet from distorting or modifying experience? Since creating a poem can be described as a complex series of choices, the poet’s selection can hardly leave the experience intact. In addition, as Larkin’s poetry testifies, language is an active participant in the process (despite his make-believe game suggesting that language is reliable). An experience is not necessarily textual; it is not a formula (this is also why Eliot’s “objective correlative” has been criticized). Larkin comes towards a contradiction with his remarks suggesting that experience is something non-verbal or pre-verbal. If it is, it cannot remain intact in a poem.

Second, this remark raises the problem of how a poem can spoon-feed its readers and make it certain that all of them will share the same taste. There is a great variety of theories about how poems are understood, but few scholars would question that it cannot be described as a decoding process even though the meaning will often be the same or similar to a great number of readers. Norman N. Holland explains: “The reason we see consensus is *not* because the poem evokes the same experience in different readers—it does not. We see consensus because different readers are using the same material” (116, emphasis in the original). Stanley Fish finds the explanation in interpretive communities, which “are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (Walder 60). These are very different theories, but they have a common denominator: different readers construct the same meaning of a poem not because they observe the same intact experience; rather, the explanation lies elsewhere.

The problem of Larkin’s point can clearly be seen if we consider David Lodge’s summary:

Poems are not made out of experience, they are made out of poetry—that is, the tradition of disposing the possibilities of language to poetic ends—modified, to be sure, by the particular experience of the individual poet, but in no straightforward sense an expression of it. T. S. Eliot’s essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ is perhaps the best-known exposition of the idea, but variations on it can be found easily in the writings of Mallarmé, Yeats, Pound and Valéry. (*Working with Structuralism* 5)

Eliot also commented on it in his introduction to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*: “If poetry is a form of ‘communication’, yet that which is to be communicated is the poem itself, and only incidentally the experience and the thought which have gone into it” (30, emphasis in the original). For Larkin, it is not “incidental”; in his poetics it is vitally important, the basis of all good poetry. His concept of tradition is also utterly different from Eliot’s idea of textual tradition: “To me the ‘tradition of poetry’ is, quite simply, emotion and honesty of emotion, and it doesn’t matter who or how it is written by if this is conveyed” (qtd. in Hamburger 14).

This sentence is from a private letter to Michael Hamburger, who remarks that the tradition of poetry (in the sense Eliot used the term) was still important to Larkin: “That foreign parts, like foreign poetry, could have liberated him from some of his constricting negatives was clear to him, as in the poem ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’, about the years he had spent in Belfast...” (30) One must add: this urban “elsewhere” was within an English-speaking culture and a part of the United Kingdom. Hamburger’s idea is still to the point since the notion of elsewhere is one of the most significant constructs in Larkin’s poetry. Importantly, he started writing his mature verse in Belfast. This attraction to otherness is a refutation of the charge of “little Englandism”, but does not modify the core of his poetics, since this experience is also treated as non-verbal in his poems.<sup>6</sup>

The notion of the conflict between experience and its verbal representation is a cardinal point in Ted Hughes’s poetics, too. In *Poetry in the Making* he writes: “In a way, words are continually trying to displace our experience. And in so far as they are stronger than the raw life of our experience, and full of themselves and all the dictionaries they have digested, they do displace it” (120). Larkin’s and Hughes’s poetics are two different responses

---

<sup>6</sup> Larkin also uses the term imagination as a central category in his Socratic dialogue, “Round the Point” (unpublished in his lifetime, now published in *Trouble at Willow Gables*). Carol Rumens suggests that this text gives evidence of Larkin’s preference for the Jungian anima (as opposed to the animus), and discusses his poems along the lines of femininity and masculinity. Rumens’s arguments raise some significant questions about Larkin’s poetics (for example, about the dichotomy between the novelist and the poet in Larkin), and her eye-opening essay could serve as a starting point to reconsider what imagination meant to Larkin.

to the heritage of Eliot and his followers' modernism. Larkin pretends to trust language as an adequate conveyor of experience; Hughes regrets that words win over life since "[t]he struggle to possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self, has been man's principal occupation" (*Poetry in the Making* 124). In another essay he praises Wilfred Owen for his idea "that in the poems nothing mattered but truth to the facts", adding that his model "was duly taken over" by Larkin ("Introduction" XXIV).

Larkin and Hughes both intended to break with modernism, in their very different ways, although Terry Whalen has pointed out echoes of T. E. Hulme and Ezra Pound in Larkin's poetics (99-100). These interfaces, however, seem to be accidental, rather than essential, and they do not provide enough evidence to relegate Larkin's verse and poetics to the imagist tradition. The influence of Thomas Hardy was much more significant. In a book review he quotes Leslie Stephen: "The ultimate aim of the poet should be to touch our hearts by showing his own, and not to exhibit his learning, or his fine taste, or his skill in mimicking the notes of his predecessors", adding that Hardy accepted this as his poetic credo with good reason, since "that is really all anyone needs to know about writing poetry" (*FR* 265). Larkin found this very important; he also quoted it elsewhere. His own "Statement" is largely founded on this remark.

It does not follow, however, that his poetics is only derived from Hardy. Indeed, the poignant contrast he saw between the poems of Yeats and Hardy is a manifestation of his ambivalent attitude towards transcendence. He chose Hardy's poetics as the dominant side, but he was always aware of the possibility of another kind of poetics. His art of choosing meant not only his open-mindedness (as an agnostic he still appreciated the values of religion, as an anti-romantic he still observed romantic achievements), but also that he was confident enough to make his own choices.

## 2.2. Beauty, Truth and Deception: the Art of Choosing

In Larkin's view the ultimate source of experience is in human life and "the only end of age" (CP 153), death. In his poetry and poetics human existence is seen as a condition largely determined by time, whose real nature is hidden from us. At the age of forty, he started his poem "Send No Money" with this image of privacy, absurdity and temporality:

Standing under the fobbed  
Impendent belly of Time  
*Tell me the truth*, I said,  
*Teach me the way things go.*  
(CP 146, emphasis in the original)

The grotesque image of this stanza (time as a fat, rich person) demonstrates that in Larkin's poetics the teacher-disciple relationship is between experience and poet rather than between poet and reader; this is what the rhetorical structure of his poems is based on. Time should teach the poet (metonymically: all human beings) because it is a basic experience, but it will not show its real nature. When Larkin was asked to select two of his favourite poems for an anthology in 1973, he chose "Send No Money" and "MCMXIV", a description of Britain before the Great War broke out. In his introduction he added:

[T]hey might be taken as representative examples of the two kinds of poem I sometimes think I write: the beautiful and the true. I have always believed that beauty is beauty, truth truth, that is not all ye know on earth nor all ye need to know, and I think a poem usually starts off either from the feeling *How beautiful that is* or from the feeling *How true that is*. (FR 39)

This is still another footnote added to what he wrote in his "Statement": "the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art" (RW 79). As I attempted to show in the previous chapter, Larkin's axiom is that a poem should preserve experience as intact as possible; therefore, he refuses to identify any object with anything else outside itself. Truth and beauty are two categories which mutually exclude each other in his philosophy: something cannot be true and beautiful at the same time. Something is true because it is not beautiful and vice versa.



2.2.1. *Keats and Larkin*

Seemingly, he says the opposite of what we see in the famous closure of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn". However, Keats's highly canonized poem is more complicated than Larkin's witty and provocative response suggests. Keats does not declare "Beauty is truth" in an authoritative tone; what he says is that *the urn seems to be saying that beauty and truth are identical*.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, when he adds, "That is all ye know on earth", he is ambiguous in two ways. On the one hand, this may refer to the whole sentence, in which the main clause simply claims that the urn is eternal. In one reading, this is what we need to know, although the urn's imperative can also be related to the axiom identifying beauty and truth: the only thing we need to know is that beauty and truth are two sides of the same coin. On the other hand, the very sentence "That is all ye know on earth" can either mean that there is no more knowledge, or that we human beings are excluded from any other kind of wisdom. This uncertainty does not appear to be far from Larkin's agnostic verse at all. Why did, then, he speak against Keats, particularly against the aphorism closing "Ode on a Grecian Urn", so frequently?

This question is particularly relevant in a discussion of Larkin's poetics since the similarities between Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb" are striking; moreover, the latter can be read as a 20<sup>th</sup>-century re-writing of the former. Both poems are based on the description of an object that contains dead bodies but on the outside illustrates life. Keats constructed an image of an ideally beautiful vessel, whose function is to contain human ashes. Larkin created a vision of a tomb in Chichester cathedral. On the Greek urn the speaker perceives the vitality of life; more precisely, the implied poet constructs it within the text. One can only agree with Andrew Motion's suggestion that the urn is Keats's "own invention" whether he had a particular urn in mind or not (*Keats* 91). On the tomb represented in Larkin's text the two figures are static and de-faced, but the touch of the two hands indicates life.

The urn and the tomb signify not only the past but also the tension between the past and the present. In Keats this is suggested by the multitude of questions in the first stanza: as they all remain unanswered, no continuity is established between the life in the pictures and the act of perception in the present. We (human beings in general) are excluded from the knowledge of the past, since history is discontinuous. Although many readers would see a

---

<sup>1</sup> As Thomas Dilworth has pointed out, the main source of Keats's ode is Shakespeare's poem "The Phoenix and the Turtle" (15), probably also familiar to Larkin. The last two stanzas of Shakespeare's text are revealing: "Truth may seem, but cannot be; / Beauty brag, but 't is not she; / Truth and beauty buried be. // To this urn let those repair / That are either true or fair; / For these dead birds sigh a prayer" (1005).

completely different meaning in Keats's poem, Larkin's text, definitely reading Keats's ode, gives evidence that the meaning I previously outlined is possible.

In Larkin the time of history becomes a void: the two effigies are shown "in the hollow of / An unarmorial age" (*CP* 111). Not unlike in Keats's ode, mortality is contrasted with the apparently eternal vision of a man and a woman: the earl and the countess. They "lie in stone" (*CP* 110), and have become signifiers in the semantics of an age different from that of their lifetime. Having lost their identities, now they are objects used by subjects in the present: the visitors of the church and the poet implied in the poem. The unasked question hidden in the text is this: what will remain of the two hands gently holding each other? To put the question in Keats's terms (since Keats also reads Larkin): does an "unheard melody"<sup>2</sup> still have significance for the 20<sup>th</sup>-century poet?

Larkin, however, does not ask any question overtly. Instead, he confirms the difference between the intention of the two long-dead people (the meaning they attributed to themselves) and the way we gaze at them today (the meaning we construct and impose on them): "They would not think to lie so long", "They would not guess...", "They hardly meant..." (*CP* 110-111). The visitors of the tomb are shown in the context of natural processes. The slow devastation by snow, sunshine and birds is followed (and intensified) by an endless line of people "Washing at their identity" (*CP* 111). As James Booth has pointed out, this is an echo of Hardy's "During Wind and Rain" (*Philip Larkin: Writer* 43). The metaphor recalls the small but steady destruction of a coast by the sea (like the image of a coastal shelf in "This Be The Verse"), and is followed by the vision of time as a void:

Now, helpless in the hollow of  
 An unarmorial age, a trough  
 Of smoke in slow suspended skeins  
 Above their scrap of history,  
 Only an attitude remains:  
 (*CP* 110)

---

<sup>2</sup> Such privative modifiers also create a common denominator for the two poets, and so does the frequent use of words of negation. In Keats, the second stanza of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a well-know example. James Booth noticed this feature in Larkin: "The appearance of 'not' 150 times after 1945 (in seventy-five poems) is perhaps scarcely remarkable in itself. But his 'not' phrases are peculiarly resonant, particularly those which double the negative..." (*Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight* 8).

This colon at the end of the penultimate stanza calls the reader's attention to the last lines, which function as a closure not only to this poem but the whole volume, *The Whitsun Weddings*. The implied poet seems to be taking a deep breath before attempting to find an answer to the question mentioned previously: what has been preserved of the two hands touching each other?

Time has transfigured them into  
 Untruth. The stone fidelity  
 They hardly meant has come to be  
 Their final blazon, and to prove  
 Our almost-instinct almost true:  
 What will survive of us is love.  
 (CP 111)

The signification of the two figures has been changed by time, which was represented earlier both as a void and as a devastating power in nature. The result of their transformation is “untruth”, a condition that was anticipated by the punning use of the verb *lie* in stanzas 1 and 3. But “untruth is not exactly the same as a lie: the prefix, by modifying the word “truth”, suggests that truth was originally there. In other words: truth has been lost in the void of time, to be replaced by beauty.

The next sentence presents what this “untruth” is: “The stone fidelity / They hardly meant has come to be / Their final blazon...” The effigies are used to signify fidelity: this is the meaning of the sign they have become. Andrew Motion relates how Larkin found the relevant word: it was his partner, Monica Jones, who “provided the word ‘blazon’ for ‘An Arundel Tomb’ when he called out to her that he needed ‘something meaning a sign, two syllables’” (*Philip Larkin* 275). Although this sounds, almost unpleasantly, like Larkin doing his crossword, it still shows his insistence on traditional stanza forms, including the right number of syllables in a line. More importantly, he surely would not have used this particular word “meaning a sign” in the final version of the poem if it had not been the word he needed. The primary meaning of *blazon* in present-day English is ‘coat-of-arms’. It is a French word, therefore it distances the dead bodies from their own Englishness the same way as the “Latin names around the base” do in stanza 3, but this word also finds place for the bodies in European cultural heritage. Julia Kristeva has enlarged on the historical significance of *blazon* in her fundamental study on intertextuality, “The Bounded Text”:

[L]audatory utterances, known as *blazons*, were abundant in France during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They come from a communicative discourse, shouted in public squares, and designed to give direct information to the crowd on wars (the number of soldiers, their direction, armaments, etc.), or on the marketplace (the quality and price of merchandise). These solemn, tumultuous, or monumental enumerations belong to a culture that might be called phonetic. [...] The blazon lost its univocity and became ambiguous: praise and blame at the same time. In the fifteenth century, the blazon was already the nondisjunctive figure par excellence. (53)

The touch of the two hands has become an icon in heraldry, but also something that has been preserved “from oblivion” (as Larkin puts it in the “Statement”) and a “nondisjunctive figure” (to use Kristeva’s phrase). The countess and the earl have become signs. What happens in “An Arundel Tomb” is the opposite of *prosopopeia* as described by Paul de Man in his essay on autobiography: instead of evoking the two dead people (and reconstructing them by using the trope of personification) the visitors to the grave (including the persona speaking in the poem) symbolically close the dead into their own effigies. The dead are not allowed to speak; posterity will speak for them.

The final aphorism both in Keats and in Larkin is presented as a fictitious excerpt. Keats introduces the direct quotation with the phrase “thou say’st”. Larkin is more enigmatic, but it is clear that the last line is a subordinate clause. In John Bayley’s reading: “‘What remains of us is love’ in the sense that love equates with self-extinction” (94). But in the penultimate line Larkin says that this is “almost true”, that is, not true. We should not believe what the urn said to Keats’s admiring spectator (or what the spectator thought the urn said).

*Almost* is a centrally important word in Larkin’s vocabulary. A later poem, “The Trees”, starts with these lines:

The trees are coming into leaf  
Like something almost being said;  
(CP 166)

The function of *almost* is the same here as in the closure of “An Arundel Tomb”: on the one hand, it means that the trees say nothing; on the other hand, it suggests that the implied poet wants them to speak. Consequently, this word reveals a romantic poet, who has a strong

desire to find meaning in an archetypal image, but also an agnostic poet, who has given up the hope that any meaning can be found in it. The trees are like Prufrock's mermaids: they will not speak to him. The same applies to cultural icons representing death: an urn or a tombstone. Burial places are silent, since death is not only the ontological end of human life, but also an epistemological end.<sup>3</sup> This latter was more important for Larkin than the former; as Carol Rumens writes: "his greatest dread was the annihilation of sensation, not so much death as an unending consciousness of not-being" ("Philip Larkin's Lost Childhood" 44).

Anyone could argue that the last sentence of Larkin's poem ("What will survive of us is love") is still there, and it will surely linger on in the readers' memory as something citable without the original context. As Laurence Lerner writes: "By setting up within the poem all the expected excitements that life cheats us of, Larkin can (with varying degrees of explicitness) tell the lovely lies even as he asserts that they are lies" ("Larkin's strategies" 118). The closure of the poem (also the last line of *The Whitsun Weddings*) is highly ambivalent. Larkin is fully aware that we are all deceived if we believe the attractive banality of this line, but he also knows that we are tempted to believe it. (John Carey identifies these two conflicting attitudes as the male voice of scepticism and the female voice of belief [63].) We remain "less deceived" in this interim position between a desire for eternal love (beauty) and the consciousness of mortality (truth). Identifying the two is self-deception in Larkin's philosophy.

In his provocative statements against Keats, Larkin blinded himself deliberately to the ambiguities of the romantic poet's ode. A more thorough understanding, let alone the assimilation of Keats, would have deprived him of the image of a poet he could attack. He needed such attacks to defend his own position, but whenever he did so he was wearing a mask and playing a role.<sup>4</sup> The role is that of a man of letters who is not interested in literature *as literature*, only as a medium of experience. When he was asked by *London Magazine* about how he saw the position of poetry in the sixties, his reply was this:

[After the age of twenty-five] all poetry seems more or less unsatisfactory. Inasmuch as it is not one's own, and experience makes literature look insignificant beside life, as

---

<sup>3</sup> There is a central image in Jim Crace's novel *Being Dead*, which shows striking similarities with "An Arundel Tomb" (12). Although Crace was not conscious of any influence when writing this part of the novel (as he told me in conversation, he realized the similarity only after completing the text [7 May 2002]), this image is still a reading of Larkin's poem, in which the effigies are transformed into dead bodies: two people who have become statues of themselves.

<sup>4</sup> I will enlarge on the general problem of masks and role-playing in Chapter 2.4. For further aspects of the controversial relationship between Keats and Larkin see Michael O'Neill's "'Fond of What He's Crapping On'" and Edna Longley's "Poète Maudit Manqué".

indeed life does beside death. Such reason may contribute to the growing disinclination that I find myself to keep up with poetry. (*FR* 14)

This is a concise summary of an essential thesis in Larkin's poetics: poetry is determined by life, which is determined by death. The consequence is that all good poetry is about death. Paradoxically, this is so because poetry can only be about life. Human existence and non-existence, life and the consciousness of death shape poetry. In this process the poet is a mediator between something non-verbal (experience) and something verbal (poetry). In the famous remark quoted and discussed in the previous chapter, "I didn't choose poetry: poetry chose me" (*RW* 62), to all appearances, he also emphasizes the determination of the poet by life rather than by literature. It is poetry as an activity of life and as an element of fate that chose him. Fatalism is the most fundamental of all principles that he learnt from Hardy; one of its most important consequences is that the poet as a subject appears to be a target of choice.

### 2.2.2. *Something and Nothing as Experience*

Since the notions of both human life and choice are in the centre of Larkin's thinking, some of the texts in which he uses the terms are of particular importance in his poetics. In a talk that he gave on the BBC, he explained what he meant by "life": "... because what one writes depends so much on one's character and environment—either one writes about them or to escape from them—it follows that, basically, one no more chooses what one writes than one chooses the character one has or the environment one has" (*FR* 79). This remark tacitly implies (in the two vehicles of the simile) that Larkin saw character and environment as the two major constituents of the experience that must be preserved in poetry. For him, experience is an event in which character and environment meet and become related to each other. More often than not, the relationship between the subject and its social or natural environment results in a conflict.

It follows that the way experience finds its way to the poem is not only slow but also painful, as he said in a radio interview (*FR* 113). He needed pain (by which he probably meant psychic pain) to get a clear view of the subject matter. Pain is a fundamental element not only in the experience but also in the recreation part of the writing process as described by

Larkin, and forms a part of a larger structure in which a variety of emotions both in experience and in the text to be written are perceived, related to each other and represented.<sup>5</sup>

Writing about one of his favourite poets, John Betjeman, Larkin reconstructs the essence of the older poet's poetics as a conviction that "nothing is to be gained by *questioning* an emotion once it has been experienced" (*FR* 149, emphasis in the original). Larkin's phrasing conceals that there are two kinds of emotion at stake: the emotion within the situation, i.e. the emotion *as experience*, and the feeling *now* about the experience *then*. His poetry, however, provides evidence that he was clearly conscious of this duality. In one of his major poems, "Maiden Name", he asks the question: what is the meaning of the maiden name once the woman has got married and does not use it any more? Does it still exist as a sign with two firm constituents, the signified and the signifier? Or has the meaning disappeared, perhaps slipped? It has not, since the woman as a part of reality still exists. Eventually he declares what the signified of the maiden name is: "It means what we feel now about you then" (*CP* 101). The emotion as something verbal is constructed in the present. The poem is self-reflexive: it demonstrates how experience (which is non-verbal but constructed by culture) is "transferred" into a text enabling both the poet and the reader to relive the situation, and reconstruct a pre-verbal experience by writing and reading. This also reveals that Larkin's poetry and poetics are both different from Betjeman's: he does ask questions about his own emotions because he intends to grasp the experience of life in its complexity (it is not without reason that he uses the word *complex* in the "Statement"). He never ceases to admire the simplicity Betjeman offered: the confession of his Christian belief (which Larkin did not share), feeling at home everywhere in England (which is contrasted with images of elsewhere in Larkin), and his nostalgic representation of childhood, but to preserve composite experience in poems he chose a different way (even though he pretended that the choice was not his).

Unlike Betjeman, Larkin always refused to be simplistic when dealing with the beginning of his personal life. Famously, he saw his childhood as uneventful: he called it "forgotten boredom" ("Coming") and a period that was "unspent" ("I Remember, I Remember"). This emptiness appears as a textual construct in his poetry: his parodies, comic and ironic images suggest that visions of a happy childhood are based on self-deception. James Fenton has remarked: "... paradoxically, the urge to destroy his past (in his psyche) coexisted with the archivist's urge to preserve it" (52). Fenton hits the nail on the head: Larkin

---

<sup>5</sup> I will enlarge on the significance of pain as a creative force in Chapter 2.5.

sees his childhood as uneventful, because he constructs it as such in his poetry. More precisely: first he constructs the memory as non-verbal experience, then “transfers” it into the shape of a poem. But he also intends to preserve everything, including nothingness. His poems written about this subject matter (“Nothing To Be Said”, “Wants”, “Aubade”, etc.) testify that nothingness must be preserved in poetry. “Nothing, like something, happens anywhere”, he says in the closure of “I Remember, I Remember”. One consequence is that absence as a target of representation in poetry is just as relevant as presence.

In some of his poems the lack of an experience is a form of experience itself; therefore, it can be used as raw material for poetry. This is in accordance with his attraction to nothingness as an ontological and epistemological category: what deserves preserving is the perfection seen in empty spaces (the sea, the blue sky, etc.). Nothingness is particularly important in his representation of human life, since aging means not only remembering, but also forgetting, a gradual creation of nothingness in the mind. In “The Old Fools” Larkin describes an old people’s home, and asks questions about the consciousness of its inhabitants. The last sentence of the poem is: “Well, / We shall find out” (*CP* 197). The problem is not only that by the time we find the answer we forget the question, as I indicated in the previous chapter. The gap between the question and the answer also signifies that the possibility of choosing has disappeared from old people’s lives. As Hugh Underhill writes:

Repeatedly Larkin’s poems suggest that though we may busy our lives with the illusions of choice, in the end we are confronted with the same implacable truth—the old fools find ‘the power / Of choosing gone’, the patients in ‘The Building’ are ‘at the vague age that claims the end of choice’. (192)

Underhill suggests that Larkin saw this lack of choice as a metonymy of human life in general. Consequently, Larkin’s declaration that “writing a poem is still not an act of the will” (*RW* 84) means not only that the motivation of writing a poem is non-verbal, as I claimed in the previous chapter; it also implies that the power of choice does not belong to the poet (cf. “I didn’t choose poetry: poetry chose me” [*RW* 62]). As I indicated above, one cannot take this at face value: letting fate decide about his life is his choice. Pretending not to choose is at the core of his role-playing.

This role-playing is intended to demonstrate that human life is a gradual approach to death without the possibility of real choices. (The process based upon this game also creates its own paradox when the poet decides to write about human life as he conceives of it: he



eventually *chooses* the career of a writer of life and death.) The ultimate annihilation, death, is both an ontological and epistemological terminal: it *is* nothingness, but preservation is excluded from its realm. Death is not only the end of existence, but also the end of thinking about and within existence. In other words: death is where poetry ends.

It follows that good poetry can only be paradoxical. If it neglects death as a subject matter, it gives up any hope of representing something more significant than life. This “something”, of course, is nothingness. David Lodge quotes Wittgenstein in his reading of Larkin:

Death is, we can all agree, a ‘nonverbal’ reality, because, as Wittgenstein said, it is not an experience *in* life; and it is in dealing with death, a topic that haunts him, that Larkin achieves the paradoxical feat of expressing in words something that is beyond words. (“Philip Larkin: the Metonymic Muse” 127)

The oxymoronic fusion of the possibility of speaking about death and the impossibility of speaking within death is a tacitly admitted principle in Larkin. Since his main subject matter is non-verbal (and since experience is non-verbal by definition in his theory), his strategy is to write non-literary literature. In 1959 he wrote: “It may be objected that one cannot derogate literature by calling it literary, but alas, one can. To be literary means to receive one’s strongest impressions—one’s subject matter—secondhand from literature instead of first-hand from experience...” (*FR* 207). The controversy is that, as James Booth has written, “Larkin offers only poetry” (“Why Larkin’s Poetry” 18). He devoted his life to poetry (even at the expense of other pleasures of life) while claiming to be non-literary.<sup>6</sup>

The previous quotation shows that Larkin made a fundamental distinction between primary and secondary experience and accepted only the former. At least this was his theory, but (as I demonstrated in the previous chapter) not his practice: he was inspired both by other poets and the sister arts. His declarations, partly contradicting his poems, served two purposes: to reiterate his rejection of Eliot’s poetics and to put special emphasis on the importance of life and death as primary experience (allegedly the only form of experience) inspiring his verse.

Paul de Man writes in an essay about Wordsworth’s poetry: “the relationship between the self and time is necessarily mediated by death; it is the experience of mortality that

---

<sup>6</sup> For further aspects on non-literariness in Larkin see Chapter 2.3.

awakens within us a consciousness of time that is more than merely natural” (*Romanticism* 93). We are able to understand time (which is “more than merely natural”) because we are aware of our mortality. In Larkin we see the reverse of the thesis: we cannot speak about death authentically, because we are also unable to speak about time. More precisely: we cannot represent (even understand) time directly. However, giving up the representation of time would mean giving up preserving experience in history—and this ambition is a cardinal point in Larkin’s credo. To make the preservation of experience in historical time possible he developed three strategies to construct images of temporal existence in his poems.

First, instead of time as continuity, he represents units of time. Titles such as “Afternoons” and “Days” are revealing. In the latter poem (which can also be read as a parody of Emerson’s poem with the same title) he contrasts units of time with the indivisibility of time after death. Importantly, he chooses days as units, as if also linking his poems with novels of modernism (such as *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway*) as opposed to larger units, which would recall 19<sup>th</sup>-century grand narratives. Once again, what is missing in such poems (namely, a life story suggesting continuity) is as important as the presence of a short unit of time.

Second, he represents aging. Visions of getting old, approaching death and being jealous of young people (“Sad Steps”, “Aubade”, “High Windows”) construct old age without any sense of continuity. It always means losing something—most importantly, the ability to form a notion of existence as totality. In Larkin’s poems people see only units of time; continuity is unavailable to them, since it belongs to the realm of death.

Third, he transforms time into space. His poems suggest that human beings can imagine time only as space. This is the reason why railway symbolism is so significant in Larkin: the railway lines in his novels and poems such as “I Remember, I Remember”, “The Whitsun Weddings” and “Dockery and Son” are representations of time as space. Covering a distance as determined by the railway timetable becomes a projection of temporality into the three dimensions of geography.

These strategies also explain why photography was so important for Larkin, both as an art he practiced and as a recurrent symbol in his poetry. In his biography, Richard Bradford refers to Larkin’s one-time lady-friend, Patsy Strang’s autobiographical novel, *Playing the Harlot*, in which the character who is Larkin’s alter ego “shows a dedication to photography as an art through which its practitioner can possess a subject without endangering its separateness” (131). This is the ultimate meaning of photography in his life work. Art is not only a means of separation but also a metaphor of death: by representing somebody, the poet

symbolically separates the person from life. In his “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album” Larkin’s persona possesses a woman only through the pictures. This is almost the same as the Duke’s possession of his late wife in Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess”. To be more precise: a photograph represents death and life, Eros and Thanatos simultaneously, as do the pictures in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. In the last line of the poem the speaker refers to his image of the beloved girl as “Smaller and clearer as the years go by” (CP 72), using the kind of language we normally use about dead people. Writing poetry is only possible with metaphors of death, which does not make the thought of actual death less terrifying.

### 2.2.3. *Idyll and Facing Death*

The horror of facing death can be counterbalanced only by the retreat into an idyllic world. A characteristically Larkinesque paradox is that once he has retreated into his private world, he finds no idyll “but other things”, as he puts it in “Vers de Société” (CP 182). In his authorized biography Andrew Motion writes: “While seeming to regret exclusion, Larkin in fact relishes solitude” (*Philip Larkin* 373). This may be true of the real author, but not of the poet implied in the texts. His poems (particularly in his last volume, *High Windows*, and later) construct a persona who regrets being left out and suffers from loneliness. (The only exception is “Livings II”, which represents the euphoria of loneliness in a dramatic monologue.) This can well be discerned in the previously mentioned poem, “Vers de Société”. *Vers de Société* is “a type of light verse which deals gracefully with polite society and its concerns” (Beckson and Ganz 268). Larkin’s poem, of course, does not render what the title indicates, should it be taken seriously, as is obvious from the sarcasm of the first lines:

*My wife and I have asked a crowd of craps  
To come and waste their time and ours; perhaps  
You’d care to join us? In a pig’s arse, friend.  
(CP 181, emphasis in the original)*

Thus, the poem can be read as a caricature of a once popular genre. Janice Rossen suggests that Warlock-Williams is a “sinister parody of an upper-class name”, and his style is “inverted snobbism” (126). But the text is a dramatic monologue, too, in which the speaker

utters only two sentences: first he rejects, then, in the last line, he accepts the same invitation to dinner. The rest of the poem is contemplation on the meaninglessness of social life (which, however, makes one forget about the terror of death) as opposed to creative solitude (which, on the other hand, is inseparable from anguish and the constant awareness of death). The two possible choices are indicated by two polite and elliptical phrases: at the beginning of the poem by “*Dear Warlock-Williams: I’m afraid –*”, and at the end by “*Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course –*” (CP 181-82). In both cases the punctuation mark is a dash, not unlike in an Emily Dickinson poem (a poet Larkin admired). Ellipses also mean ambiguities. Stan Smith writes: “What led to this change of heart [i.e. finally accepting the invitation] is suggested by a deeper, truer sense of that formulaic ‘I’m afraid’. One is *really, truly* afraid...” (269, emphasis in the original)

The idyll of privacy always turns out to be a failure or mere illusion in Larkin’s poetry. In some poems he tried to retreat from it into the idyll of an idealized community (“To the Sea”, “Show Saturday”, “At Grass”), but even such communities cannot change the ultimate absurdity of human existence. What such communities construct is beauty, which, in Larkin’s poetics, cannot be true by definition.

It follows that in his poetry beauty is linked with images of communities, truth with separation. Experience needs to be distanced if the poet wants to see its true nature, but this also means distancing the character that is constructed in the poem. “Deceptions” is a case in point. The experience (the suffering of a Victorian woman figure from Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*) gets closer to the reader while it separates itself from the poet and achieves autonomy. In this way, the distancing of experience and respecting it without reservation are two aspects of the same attitude, and the poem can be read as a demonstration of the “Statement”.

The chapter in Mayhew’s book that the poem is based on narrates the life story of an old prostitute. The middle-class male author also makes her give a summary of self-characterization: “I’ve no character. I’ve never been used to do anything, and I don’t see what employment I stand a chance of getting” (83). The poem is a re-reading of the life story and also the construction of the “non-existent” character as a gap in Mayhew’s text. The raped girl is the victim not only of a primitive man, but also of “bridal London” turning a blind eye to her pain and humiliation. Suffering is a central value, but it does not receive a Christian interpretation in Larkin’s world view, since he does not believe that it leads to redemption. Consolation is also hopeless: from a communicational point of view the gap between the

addresser and the addressee is not bridged. The experience is “transferred” to the reader—and this results in the ambivalence of the poem, which has often been discussed.

The point Larkin’s speaker makes is this: we must feel sympathy for the girl, but we should also see that she shared the insight of all sufferers into the true nature of a situation. “Suffering is exact” (*CP* 32), but the momentary pleasure of the man raping the girl is self-deception. It does not, however, mean that Larkin forgives the sin or that he feels more sympathy for the aggressor. J. Goode comments:

The supreme virtue of the poem is [...] that the poet recognizes his own limitations too; his sympathy can only be partial because it is qualified by his own desolate desire, like the seducer, he is deceived because he feels, most strongly, not the suffering, but the disgusting violence of male desire and he is therefore, only capable of a complete identification with the blind frustrated man. [...] The irony is not, in the end, self-defensive; on the contrary, it is intensely, even bitterly, self-critical. (134)

The strong sense of “you” and “I” in the poem makes a distinction between the “less deceived” and the “more deceived” positions, and the point the poem makes about transferring experience is this: true experience (as opposed to the experience of beauty) is an experience of suffering. All other experiences are self-deceptive.

According to Erving Goffman, self-deception is closely linked with role-playing: it “can be seen as something that results when two different roles, performer and audience, come to be compressed into the same individual” (87). The seducer in “Deceptions” performs the rape for himself as the audience (to use Goffman’s theatrical metaphor in the description of social interaction). What his divided self enjoys is not sexual satisfaction but viewing himself as the triumphant actor in a play. He deceives himself because he has become his own audience in a performance.

In a book review Roy Sorensen offers a summary of Sartre’s discussion of self-deception:

In *Being and Nothingness* Jean-Paul Sartre exhales an impossibility proof: to deceive, one must not believe the deception; but to be deceived, one must believe the deception. If the deceiver is identical to the deceived, then he both believes the deception and does not believe the deception. Contradiction. (22)

Contradiction, of course, is not the same as nonsense. Larkin was interested in the mechanism of self-deception. One simple solution to the contradiction is to identify the deceiver as the id and the deceived as the superego (or the ego). In this case the deceiver and the deceived are not identical, but the result is self-conflict and remorse within the same subject.<sup>7</sup> To be not deceived is to ignore the self-deceiving seduction of the id. The ego must feel pain instead of pleasure; in Larkin's poetics this is the only way to be "less deceived" and to write poetry. This is why "suffering is exact", as the poem suggests.

Jean Hartley comments on Larkin's concept of suffering in a personal recollection:

Philip felt that the doer of any act is always more deceived than the passive recipient of an act. For the doer acts from desire which comes from unfulfilled wants but when these wants are fulfilled they do not necessarily bring happiness. Whereas, Philip claimed, there was absolutely no deception involved in suffering: 'no one *imagines* they're suffering'. (83, emphasis in the original)

Larkin also wrote in a letter as early as 1942 that "we have a greater capacity for expressing pain than pleasure" (Letter 41). Thus suffering becomes the only hope for cognition. What seems to be cynicism (the speaker finding the seducer more regrettable than the raped girl) is actually the search of a sad and agnostic person for what is true in an experience. This is why Oliver James's remark on Larkin characterizes something in the texts rather than the actual poet: "The definition of a cynic, the way I understand it, is someone who takes pleasure in mocking other people's enjoyment. And it has always seemed to me that Larkin did that" (qtd. in Hartley and Thorpe 3).

Of course, it is the speakers who are often cynical and supercilious in Larkin's poems. It follows from his careful distinction between experiences and writing that in most of his major poems one can distinguish the actor in a situation from the implied poet who writes a text about it. It has frequently been pointed out that the comic figure in the first two stanzas of "Church Going" is completely different from the contemplative speaker in the rest of the poem. The speaker in the first lines of "High Windows" is a cynical and jealous old man, but the implied poet in the last stanza reflects on the attraction of the blue sky symbolizing the transcendental value of nothingness. Furthermore, to take the most enigmatic and misleading example: "This Be The Verse" seems to be not only cynical but also obscene in the extreme.

---

<sup>7</sup> Sartre enlarges on this in the chapter entitled "Bad Faith" in *Being and Nothingness*, and doubts that psychoanalysis helps us understand what self-deception is (94).

However, the tension between the title (borrowed from Robert Louis Stevenson's "Requiem") and the three stanzas of the poem make a distinction between the actor with his advice not to have children and the implied poet, who says that poems still need to be written (and with the allusion to Stevenson suggesting that this is his last will).

It is this duality of "true" experience and the urge to write about it (i.e. to preserve experience) that made the form of the dramatic lyric appropriate for Larkin. As I suggested in the Introduction, in this form, the first agent in the poem (the actor shown within a situation) perceives something, and the second agent aims at understanding it (i.e. constructing a meaning). The act of perception and that of cognition are related to each other in a paradoxical way in these first-person lyrics; all the poems mentioned in the previous paragraph belong to this category.<sup>8</sup> The distinction between the two agents is also manifest in the difference between two kinds of poetic diction: one using the vocabulary of sensation, the other that of contemplation. The paradox is that while following literary models (such poems are frequent in Keats, Arnold, Hardy, etc.) Larkin's ambition was to be non-literary.

---

<sup>8</sup> I have borrowed Ralph W. Rader's term "dramatic lyric", but given it a different definition. For further details see Chapter 2.4.

### 2.3. Audenesque Larkin: Non-literary Literature

In his book on modernism, Peter Childs sums up David Lodge's ideas about the significance of using metaphors and metonymies in 20<sup>th</sup>-century British poetry:

The socially aware political writers of the 1930s favoured metonymy while the late Modernists, such as Beckett, Lowry and Lawrence Durrell, staged a recovery for metaphor before the down-to-earth postwar authors (such as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, John Wain) once more championed a realist style. (189)

As I pointed out in the previous chapters, Larkin emphasized the mimetic function of poetry; the sparing use of metaphors and his preference for metonymy was only one manifestation of his ambition to write a kind of poetry in which what is *in the poem* is more relevant to the reader than the poem itself. Lodge's outline of three generations (the Oxford poets of the thirties, the late modernists of the forties/fifties and the Movement poets) calls attention to the importance of the connections between the thirties and the Movement: when rejecting late modernism, the poets of the sixties tended to seek their predecessors in the thirties. W. H. Auden was particularly significant in shaping Larkin's poetics.

In a book review Larkin wrote that Auden was "not only one of the century's major poets but one of its most complex characters" (*FR* 282). Although this seems to be a cliché (probably all major poets are complex characters), it is still relevant in Larkin's poetics. He emphasizes complexity, which is a word he uses in reference to experience in the "Statement". Reading Auden, no doubt, was one of his fundamental experiences and, paradoxically, this literary experience helped him develop his poetics of non-literary literature (another paradox).

#### 2.3.1. *Two Poets and Two Generations*

Both Auden and Larkin are frequently seen as the emblematic figures of their respective generations: the thirties and the Movement. Although Larkin was fifteen years younger, they were still contemporaries: when Auden died in 1973, Larkin had already written most of his major poems (his last volume was published in 1974). Although the two poets met only twice (*SL* 524), Auden was definitely a father figure for Larkin, offering possible answers to his



questions and dilemmas. Larkin's experience of reading Auden is as complex and dynamic as the older poet's character: it ranges from Larkin's admiration of Auden in the 1940s, through a rejection of thirties poetry and a vision of Auden's work as a composite and controversial whole.

It follows from the emblematic position of the two poets that any feature one points out in their poetics will almost automatically be taken as a metonymy of their generations—it is another question whether such generalizations are justifiable or falsifying. Still another question is whether these generations can be seen as cohesive movements with leading figures at the centre. Although the acronym “MacSpaunday” is often used in reference to Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, Auden and Cecil Day-Lewis, they did not form a coherent group. In a review of MacNeice's letters David Wheatley observes: “[Auden's] correspondence with MacNeice is represented here by a solitary letter (and one, later letter from Auden to MacNeice). Nor are there any letters to Spender, Day-Lewis (so much for MacSpaunday) or Isherwood” (4). Spender also said in a public lecture (University of East Anglia, 18 October 1988) that it was not until 1957 that Auden, Day-Lewis and he were in the same room for the first time. The term “Movement” for Larkin's generation is even more controversial. Nevertheless, when Blake Morrison published his monograph entitled *The Movement* (1980), he gave it the subtitle *English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*, making it clear that he identified the Movement as the mainstream of the period.

When the anthology entitled *New Lines* was published in 1956, it demonstrated that the nine poets<sup>1</sup> included belonged together. The name “Movement” was a critical construct and, in Ian Hamilton's opinion, the anthology merely drew a line between these poets and their imitators in the fifties. In other words, the cohesive force was high aesthetic quality rather than similarity (130).

This is partly true. For all the differences (for example, between the “provincialist” Larkin and the “traditionalist” Davie) the Movement poets show some general features. (The quotation from Peter Childs at the beginning of this chapter is revealing: all the three authors he mentions as representatives of sixties poetry belong to the Movement.) Most of the nine poets had been publishing poetry for at least ten years by the time the anthology came out. As a trend in literary history, the Movement can be seen as a reaction against a tradition represented by the romantics and their successors: the modernists and other metaphorical or expressionistic poets (such as Dylan Thomas). They share a tendency towards simple poetic

---

<sup>1</sup> They are Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, Thom Gunn, John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin and John Wain.

diction and the sparing use of metaphors. One of their critics has wittily called Movement poetry “creative photography” (Kuby 154).

Alan Jenkins points out: “Denying the existence of the Movement, or denying that, if it existed, one had any part in it, seems to have started almost at the same time as the Movement itself” (187). Karl Miller’s answer in the same collection of essays is: “the Movement’s internal differences didn’t stop it from being a movement, and it has remained one even after it ceased to be one” (183). Miller’s oxymoronic remark tacitly reveals the desire of posterity to construct a narrative of literary history, which includes the ambition to see a hero or a leading figure at the centre of a trend. Detecting such a leader is sometimes justifiable: Eliot and Ezra Pound developed much of the vocabulary and many of the principles the modernists used; for the Group of the 1960s Philip Hobsbaum and Edward Lucie-Smith played the role of literary organizers.

On the other hand, neither Auden nor Larkin could be seen as a systematic thinker, let alone the lawgiver for a generation. Even Auden’s famous aphorism, “Poetry makes nothing happen” in his elegy written in memory of Yeats (*Collected Poems* 248), can be read only as one of his many, often contradictory remarks. Elsewhere he enlarged on this idea: “A writer is a maker, not a man of action. To be sure, some, in a sense all, of his works are transmutations of his personal experiences...” (qtd. in Carpenter XV). Auden claims that there is no poetry without personal experience; in his “Statement” Larkin reads this as a thesis about the power of experience rather than about the power of poetry. “Poetry makes nothing happen”, so far Larkin agrees, but he is more interested in another question: what makes poetry happen? The answer is: personal experience does, and this idea still echoes Auden. This is why the poet’s “prime responsibility” is to experience, not to the written word.

### 2.3.2. *Transmutation and Transference*

Whereas Auden sees the process from experience to poetry as “transmutation”, Larkin uses the term “transference”. The first *OED* meaning of transmutation is ‘change of condition; mutation; sometimes implying alternation or exchange’; it is also used in natural sciences, particularly in physics. Transference is ‘conveyance from one place, or thing to another’; it is also a term used to denote a process between analyst and patient in psychoanalysis (as an English equivalent of the German *Übertragung*). The difference between the two words signifies not only Larkin’s interest in Freudianism but also that in his poetics he carefully

avoids the idea of mutation. Of course, literally speaking, Larkin wants the impossible: a non-verbal experience cannot be transferred into the verbal form of poetry without changing it (in the physical sense of Auden's transmutation: one kind of material becoming another). His ambition is to keep the change to a minimum. As a result, he prefers colloquial diction to eloquence; metonymies and similes to metaphors. This principle of his poetics is also shown in the development of his poetry in the early fifties. As Laurence Lerner writes: "Larkin's great breakthrough was his move *towards* the explicit" ("Larkin's strategies" 117, emphasis in the original). Lerner's italics suggest that Larkin was aware of the paradoxical nature of his poetics. He can never be fully explicit: language intervenes with its attendant figuration.

He aims at preserving experience, although he knows it is impossible in poetry. "Why I should do this I have no idea", he adds (*RW* 79). Larkin's essays and statements are full of such remarks about a lack of consciousness: "How I reconcile this with my total acceptance of Lawrence I have no idea" (*FR* 10). "Whether this represents saturation, anaestheticism, or purposeful exclusion of destruction I could not say" (*FR* 14). "Why he should be blamed for not sympathizing with the crowds on Armistice Day, I don't quite know" (*FR* 25). These are only some examples taken randomly from the first few pages of *Further Requirements*; one could find many more, and notions of a lack of consciousness in his poetry would deserve a study in their own right. This emphasis on intuitive knowledge is in accordance with the priority of imagination as opposed to intellect. In 1957 he wrote:

Surely a writer's only 'necessary engagement' is with his subject-matter, which is not primarily a conscious choice at all, but is what generates in his imagination the peculiar excitement that draws intellect, feeling and expression readily and appropriately into service until the subject has been realized. [...] In other words, good social and political literature can exist only if it originates in the imagination, and it will do that only if the imagination finds the subject exciting, and not because the intellect thinks it important; and it will succeed only in so far as the imagination's original concept has been realized. (*FR* 4)

Larkin's manifest anti-intellectualism (an important part of his role playing) carefully hides the literary influences that shaped his poetics. It is not surprising, therefore, that possible answers to the faux-naïve question "Why I should do this" (i.e. preserve experience) can be found in Auden.

In “The Virgin and the Dynamo” Auden describes the process of writing poetry as the struggle between “the recollected occasions of feeling” (i.e. experience) and “the verbal system”. Auden adds: “As members of crowds, every occasion [i.e. experience] competes with every other, demanding inclusion and a dominant position to which they are not necessarily entitled...” (68-69). Auden speaks about equilibrium between experience and language; in Larkin’s reading, what follows from this balance is the language-user’s (the poet’s) responsibility to “occasions of feeling”. The overwhelming power of language (which Larkin was as aware of as any modernist or postmodernist) needs to be counterbalanced by the poet’s sticking to non-verbal experience (which Larkin frequently referred to as something appearing in imagination, a non-verbal faculty of the mind).

For the sake of this equilibrium, both poets subordinated their political views to the quality of their poetry. In this way, they converted themselves into actors in their own plays. The *dramatis personae* are directed by the poet, who has become a virtual stage director. To put it another way, since they treated politics as one of many possible experiences (using them as “occasions” to develop feelings and write poetry), they were also ready to view it as raw material for their verse. The voices that we hear in their poems belong to fictitious personae, not the actual poet. But they are aware that the only way they can write poetry of a high standard is by directing their actors in the poem. The only way they can construct literariness is by respecting the plurality of the non-literary world as endless experience. Auden the poet was able to see his own devotion to communism from the outside; Larkin viewed his own conservative nationalism as one of the experiences that should be preserved. The use of experience in both life works is versatile: it ranges from the mask of unconditioned enthusiasm to satires and parodies. But the basis of the poem is always life experience (at least in Auden’s and Larkin’s own reading), even when the *form* of the poem is a pastiche.

The principle of non-literary literature deserves its non-theoretical theory. In a book review Larkin writes: “It is rather surprising that in an age when poetry is run by whey-faced juiceless creatures in universities Donald Davie should be the only one whose work is complemented even faintly with a published poetry theory” (*FR* 219). He made at least three points in this sarcastic remark. First, his problem is not with theory itself: he speaks against those who *pretend* to have a theory. Second, he sees danger in the kind of verse that is alien to life; this is why he rejected the idea that poetry should be linked with university education. (This tendency was particularly important for the Group poets in the sixties, who formed study groups resembling university seminars to discuss and criticize each other’s poetry.) Third, to Larkin, literariness meant cosmopolitan attitudes and modernist principles.

(Importantly, the book by Davie that he writes about in the review I have quoted from is inspired by a poem by the Polish author Mickiewicz.) The three suggestions boil down to the same idea: the big danger for poetry is losing sight of the reader. The question that remains is: who is this reader?

Larkin owes a lot to Auden's notion of the ideal reader, which is derived from the concept of poetry as a medium. Auden writes: "Before he [the reader] is aware of any other qualities it [the poem] may have, I want his reaction to be: 'That's true', or, better still, 'That's true; why didn't I think of it before myself?'" (qtd. in Carpenter 419). It is not the poem, but something mediated by the poem that should strike a chord in the reader. This is the way the poem becomes an experience that the poet shares with the audience. In both authors' poetics, it is not the poem but something in the poem that should be remembered. Larkin follows in Auden's wake, and the way they treated the language of poetry (even language in general) raises the question of their attitudes to modernism and postmodernism.

In his preface to the 1979 edition of Auden's selected poems Edward Mendelson suggests: "the surest way to misunderstand Auden is to read him as a modernist heir" (112). He sees deviation from modernism above all in Auden's remarks on language:

In making his revisions, and in justifying them as he did, Auden was systematically rejecting a whole range of modernist assumptions about poetic form, the nature of poetic language, and the effects of poetry on its audience. [...] Auden's sense of the effect of poetic language—like Brecht's sense of the effect of stage performance—differs entirely from the modernist theory that sets poetry apart from the world, either in an interior psychological arena or in the enclosed garden of reflexivity where poems refer only to themselves. (117-118)

This is one side of the coin; the other side is Auden's admiration of modernist literature (particularly Eliot), his experiments with poetry and the sister arts, and language as a central subject matter in his late texts. Whereas Eliot's poetry is largely about the impossibility of communication (that is, he uses language to demonstrate that it cannot be used), Auden, with all his scepticism, trusts language. One consequence is the confessionalism of much of his poetry: he rarely uses masks, which are so significant not only in Eliot but also in Yeats.

Larkin's position is somewhat similar. He himself offered the ground to measure his life work against the modernists with some of his remarks, for example those made in his

introduction to his collection of jazz criticism. This is his oft-quoted declaration about modernism:

I dislike such things not only because they are new, but because they are irresponsible exploitations of technique in contradiction of human life as we know it. This is my essential criticism of modernism, whether perpetrated by Parker, Pound or Picasso: it helps us neither to enjoy nor endure. (RW 297)

In a footnote on the same page he adds: “The reader will have guessed by now that I am using these pleasantly alliterative names to represent not only their rightful owners but every practitioner who might be said to have succeeded them.” Surely, he did not mean Auden, whom he admired all his life. While celebrating “what is local, well-made, modest and accessible” (Motion, *Philip Larkin* 53) in the early Auden, he also shared some other features with him, such as his interest in the sister arts. Auden’s collaboration with some of the major composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (mainly Stravinsky and Britten) and his experiments with film and theatre are well known; Larkin’s similar interests are carefully hidden, therefore often missed. But it is revealing that in the passage previously quoted he uses the names of a jazz musician, a poet and a painter. These are his antiheroes, but he could have made a similar list of his heroes, for example of Louis Armstrong, Thomas Hardy and Paul Cézanne.<sup>2</sup>

What Larkin most obviously noticed in Auden was his anti-modernist tendency. As I remarked in the previous chapters, Larkin was also an anti-modernist who, on the other hand, was fully aware of a post-modern world. Their trust in the conventional language of poetry (including meter and stanza form) links the two poets, and also makes them experimental within their self-created (or willingly accepted) boundaries. On the other hand, their unconditioned submission to poetry forms an extremely fruitful paradox with the conviction I outlined above: what really matters is what is *in* the poem. It should be remembered, however, that the subject matter of their poems also include *language itself* and *politics*.

I suggested earlier that language is a central subject matter in Larkin (see my comment on Deborah Cameron’s essay at the end of the Introduction). As far as politics as a subject matter is concerned, Humphrey Carpenter remarks that much of Auden’s poetry written in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Larkin’s devotion to traditional jazz and his volume of jazz criticism are well known. Some authors have drawn parallels between Larkin and certain composers. James Booth, for example, sees the same economy of forms and genres in Larkin as in Maurice Ravel (*The Poet’s Plight* 15); according to Peter Porter, both Larkin and Igor Stravinsky offer evidence that any form can be used in any age without being outdated (in conversation with Porter in November 1988).

thirties “preached ideas to which he did not really subscribe”, and quotes Auden’s justification: in poetry “all facts and all beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting possibilities” (153). This is why the conservative Larkin was able to adore the young Auden’s poetry; moreover, this principle was the firm basis of his reading. He often mentioned the older poet’s first three volumes as his favourites. More importantly, he was probably aware that Auden’s casual remark alluded to the duality of insight and self-judgement in the poem. Auden’s poetics can even offer a clue to read Larkin, particularly to interpret his political texts or the political in his texts. A consideration of Auden’s influence could largely contribute to the debate about Larkin’s embarrassing statements and his political correctness.

This duality of insight and judgement had its far-reaching consequences on Larkin’s poetics and poetry, particularly on the controversy between his confessionalism and mask techniques. In an interview with Ian Hamilton Larkin said: “I suppose I always try to write the truth and *I would not want to write a poem which suggested that I was different from what I am*” (FR 23, emphasis added). This is why Laurence Lerner refers to Larkin’s most typical speakers as “Larkin playing the role of Larkin” (*Philip Larkin* 40). On the other hand, in a radio programme he pointed out: “What I should like to do is to write *different* kinds of poems, that might be by different people. Someone once said that the great thing is not to be different from other people, but to be different from yourself” (qtd. in Motion, *Philip Larkin*, Contemporary Writers ser. 74, emphasis in the original).<sup>3</sup> It is very likely that he remembered Auden’s words which are quoted in Carpenter’s biography: “Having spent twenty years learning to be himself [the poet] finds that he must now start learning not to be himself” (365). Nevertheless, neither of the two poets ever gave up “being themselves”—that is representing their own selves without constructing masks.

One reason is that there was a romantic side to both poets, which was in very fruitful conflict with their disillusioned selves. (This was manifest in the Yeatsian versus Hardy-esque features in Larkin’s poetry.) The notion of poetry as a means of escape from their actual existence is deeply rooted in their poetics. Auden’s biographers note that he was more and more obsessive with his daily routine from the late thirties onwards (Carpenter 279), and Larkin’s life as a librarian was also determined by the days he lived in, as he writes in his enigmatic poem, “Days”. This text can be read as a response to Auden’s lifestyle as well as of his own:

---

<sup>3</sup> I will enlarge on the problem of masks in Chapter 2.4.

What are days for?  
 Days are where we live.  
 They come, they wake us  
 Time and time over.  
 They are to be happy in:  
 Where can we live but days?  
 (CP 67)

The ironic tone of the poem suggests that he shared Auden's inclination to stick to his daily routine, and this largely contributed to the popular notion of Larkin as an eccentric bachelor. But the monotony of a civil servant's life also created the energy he used to rebel against it, as well as the longing for absolute values: to find something that does not change. Auden found such a value in regaining Christianity, which was so helpful exactly because it was regained and always close to agnosticism. Larkin never found such a firm basis; his poetry is about a never-ending quest, echoed by the repeated manifestation of uncertainty and the lack of consciousness in his poetics.

### 2.3.3. *For and against Auden*

This difference is probably the main reason why he did not like the late Auden. Only a week after Auden's death Larkin wrote in a letter: "What an odd dichotomy—English Auden, American Auden; pre-war Auden, post-war Auden; political Auden, religious Auden; good Auden, bad Auden..." (SL 489). This suggests that the idea of being different from oneself had different meanings to the two poets. Auden may have inspired Larkin, but with his reading the younger poet turned against the father figure. Auden wanted to be different from his former self, the left-wing thirties poet. But this also meant consciously deviating from the kind of poetry Larkin admired: not the political comment, but the colloquial tone and Auden's lyricism.

Ironically, it had still been the early Auden of the thirties who helped Larkin to get rid of his own former self in the late forties. Stan Smith writes that in "Musée des Beaux Arts" Larkin found justification for his own life strategy: "The fall of the aspiring son, Icarus, must have had a personal resonance for a Larkin who saw the futility and defeat of his own boyish ambitions as, in Auden's words, 'not an important failure'" (274-275). He also wanted to



change, but not in the same way as Auden did. Instead of submitting himself to religion, he remained an agnostic facing the paradoxes of his longing for transcendence.

What he shared with Auden and a number of other fellow poets is seeing his own neurotic experiences as a source of creation. Geoffrey Hill writes: “as a person I am perpetually engrossed in my own dogged and nuzzling neuroses”, and adds that he feels the need to write poems about them, but only if the poem is “of enduring worth” (qtd. in Hart 10). Larkin or Auden could have written this and they made their own comments on neuroses and traumatic experiences. Auden writes:

The so-called traumatic experience is not an accident, but the opportunity for which the child has been patiently waiting—had it not occurred, it would have found another, equally trivial—in order to find a necessity and direction for its existence, in order that its life may become a serious matter. (qtd. in Carpenter 12)

In his last major poem, “Love Again”, Larkin asks the question why the life strategies of other people (non-neurotic people) never worked for him, and in the last three lines he gives the answer:

Something to do with violence  
A long way back, and wrong rewards,  
And arrogant eternity.  
(CP 215)

Biographical studies have treated this as referential language and pointed out the obscurity of meaning (Motion, *Philip Larkin* 477). In Larkin’s poetics (which is the topic of this study) violence and “wrong rewards” signify the traumatic experiences that Auden wrote about; the experiences that pushed Larkin towards “arrogant eternity”, that is poetry. Instead of asking what kind of childhood or adolescent experience is referred to in the poem, I will still focus on what he meant by experience in general.

The word *experience* has two basic meanings, which are significantly different, although not at all independent from each other. In *OED* the first two meanings are archaic; meanings 3 and 4 are these: 3. ‘The actual observation of facts or events, considered as a source of knowledge.’ 4. ‘The fact of being consciously the subject of a state or condition, or of being consciously affected by an event.’ In the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary*

*English* (1978) the first meaning is ‘(the gaining of) knowledge or skill which comes from practice rather than from books’; the second, ‘something that happens to one and has an effect on the mind and feelings’. Many languages have two different words for the two meanings: in German, the first meaning would be *Erfahrung*, in Hungarian *tapasztalat*; the second is translated into German as *Erlebnis*, into Hungarian as *élmény*. Larkin’s concept of experience can be identified as a meaning derived from *OED* meaning 4 and *Longman* meaning 2: it is something that shapes the mind and feeling, while the subject is conscious both of the event itself and the fact of being affected. However, the other meaning modifies his concept significantly: experience is also the “actual observation” of an event; something “which comes from practice rather than from books”. Whereas for Eliot and the other modernists literature itself is a part of life (therefore, a target of “actual observation”), for Larkin experience for the poet cannot be literary.

To quote an example from his early poetry: the most terrifying experience for the young Philip Larkin was the German bombing of his native city, Coventry, in 1940. Three years later he wrote a poem about it, entitled “A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb”, which he closed with these lines:

And now what scaffolded mind  
Can rebuild experience  
As coral is set budding under seas,  
Though none, O none sees what patterns it is making?  
(CP 269)

The poem is self-reflexive as well as paradoxical: although the speaker is sceptical about the possibility of rebuilding experience, that is what happens in the poem. The poet rebuilds the experience to enable the reader to relive it.

In its closing simile, the poem also suggests: an experience develops as a coral does under the sea. Nobody sees what it will be like in the future; the implication is that when we have an experience, it does shape our minds, but we are never fully aware of the consequences. This conviction about choice as necessity makes Larkin’s poetics similar to some basic ideas of French existentialism. He was not alone in this concept among the Movement poets of the fifties: Thom Gunn’s early poetry also emphasizes the same idea, particularly his poem “On the Move” (Fraser 241).

What remains for the poet is sticking to experience whatever the consequence may be. Gunn, however, had a different principle than Larkin. In his essay “Writing a Poem” he sums up his poetics. First he relates an event that happened to him: during a walk on a beach he caught sight of a naked family: father, mother and little boy. This experience had such a strong impact on him that he decided to write a poem about it. He continues:

I didn't know any more than that I wanted to preserve them on paper in the best way I knew, as a kind of supersnapshot, getting my feeling for them into my description of them. It wasn't till the poem was finished that I realized I had among other things found an embodiment for my haunting clusters of concepts, though I hadn't known it at the time. [...]

When I came to write the poem, it was all-important that I should be true to those feelings—even, paradoxically, at the risk of distorting the experience. (152)

Although Gunn shares the idea of preserving experience in poetry with Larkin, he puts much stronger emphasis on subjectivity. In Larkin, the image in the poem cannot distort the experience; it can only make it more clearly visible. In Gunn, the experience *needs to be* distorted; otherwise the poet's own consciousness will be distorted in the image.

In his concept of experience and treatment of language Larkin followed in Auden's wake: he did not question that experience was an autonomous entity, which can (and must) be preserved by a language that he pretends to rely on.

## 2.4. Character, Mask and Monologue

In an interview Neil Powell asked Larkin about his novels, which, as Powell put it, did not get the attention they deserved. Larkin commented: “Oscar Wilde said, ‘Give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth.’ (I think it was Wilde, it may have been Yeats.) I think that’s what I was doing: fiction enables you to tell facts, but they are so wound up together that it’s difficult to disentangle them” (*FR* 33). Larkin, no doubt, constructed masks in his two completed novels, *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*. In the former this mask is that of a boy who can be seen as a caricature of his adolescent self; in the latter it is the desired other, a girl from a foreign country. Masks and fiction, however, are not limited to his prose narratives: they are both central categories in his dramatic poetry. What he wrote when reviewing Randall Jarrell’s verse can also be seen as self-characterization: “I like him also because he refuses to give up the subject-matter of character and situation which has in this century been handed over more and more to the novel and the film. He is not afraid to dramatize an emotion, either...” (*FR* 66).

Larkin finds this attractive since character construction and situating the speaker are both fundamental in his method of writing poetry, too. As a result, the reader has a strong sense of voice in most (perhaps all) of his poems. Richard Palmer points out: “Although Philip Larkin always wrote in his own name, it is essential to identify and understand the many masks he used, consciously or otherwise, in order to come closer to what he felt was his authentic voice” (XV). This statement raises questions. Did Larkin really make the masks in his texts in order to get rid of them? Can we detect a belief in an authentic core of the subject in Larkin’s poetics? How did his attachment to masks and character construction shape his poems?

Before I attempt to answer these questions, an outline of the general problem of mask lyrics seems necessary.

### 2.4.1. Masks and Poetry

Both dramatic monologues and mask lyrics are forms of poetry in which dramatization, the construction of masks and narrativization play equally important roles. Ralph W. Rader carefully and perceptively distinguishes between these two types of verse. In the *dramatic monologue proper* (the prototype is Robert Browning’s poetry) neither the speaker, nor the setting is symbolic: everything is literal and natural, but nothing is actual. The position of the

reader tends to be similar to that of the spectator in conventional theatre, and s/he is invited to form a moral judgement of the protagonist. This position presupposes a dual attitude: insight into the situation of the protagonist on the one hand, and objectivity, which makes the moral judgement possible, on the other (139). It is always gradually that the reader understands the speaker's intention, and at the end of the poem his/her view of the character is different from that at the beginning. In this genre the speaker usually addresses a fictitious listener rather than the reader. In the process of observation there develops a relationship simulating social relations. Rader adds: "Although in all dramatic monologues we are ignorant of the final outcome of the actor's act as it develops in relation to its dramatized object, our understanding of the actor himself and his motives is always superior, as it is with real people" (139). On the other hand, in a *mask lyric*, which usually addresses the reader directly, both the speaker and the setting are constructed as symbolic; some of Rader's examples are Tennyson's "Ulysses", Browning's "Childe Roland" (significantly different from his best-known poems) and Eliot's major poems, including *The Waste Land* (141-151). To follow Rader's logic: whereas with dramatic monologues proper the reader's predominating attitude is judgement, with mask lyrics it tends to be insight.

The speaker in a poem should always be distinguished both from the actual poet and the implied poet. Dramatic monologues and mask lyrics are poems in which the speaker is explicitly constructed as a literary character. This character is as different from the author as any figure in a piece of fiction is. Furthermore, as opposed to a narrative text, the core of a mask lyric or a dramatic monologue is the character rather than the temporality of a story. In such poems character is the determining constituent of the text; this is the Archimedean point, the only (fictitious) certainty in contrast with the uncertainty of the events narrated. The actual poet may be Protean (or, to use Keats's phrase, a "chameleon"), but the character is always peculiar to one particular poem or a sequence of poems.

In Rader's typology, "the most general difference between the two groups is that the actor-speaker in the second group [in mask lyrics] is not a simulated natural person in contrast with the poet but an artificial person projected from the poet, a mask through which he speaks" (140). To elucidate the difference with an analogy, I suggest: mask lyrics show striking similarities with stream-of-consciousness, whereas dramatic monologues proper are much closer to internal monologues.<sup>1</sup> Rader's system is extremely useful in the close reading

---

<sup>1</sup> Here I use the difference between stream-of-consciousness narratives and internal monologues as, for example, Gerald Prince's *Dictionary of Narratology* defines: the former is applied to a representation of the unconscious (and tends to break with conventional syntax and morphology), the latter to the representation of the conscious

of poems. However, since the speaker in the poem is always a verbal construct which is different from the actual poet, whether we categorize a text as a mask lyric or a dramatic monologue depends largely on the reader. Therefore, in this study I will interpret both terms as figures of reading. This is, of course, based on a possible analogy with Paul de Man's approach to autobiography as a figure of reading ("Autobiography" 70). Consequently, when I refer to mask lyrics, dramatic monologues and dramatic lyrics (as defined in the Introduction) as genres, I mean genres constructed by the reader rather than something implicit in the text, although (as Larkin's example testifies) it may coincide with authorial intention.

I interpret the term "mask" as the result of a method whose aim is to construct a literary character as both speaker and actor in a narrative, which is, paradoxically, not narrated. In a story, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan suggests, "character is a construct, put together by the reader from various indications dispersed throughout the text" (36). I suggest that in a poem read as a mask lyric these "indications" are much more in the fore of the text than in a piece of fiction. (The only exception in prose fiction is the stream-of-consciousness novel, which the reader cannot understand without constructing an image of the character by pulling together the fragments of a narrative. This is the main reason why stream-of-consciousness narratives and mask lyrics show obvious similarities.) Rimmon-Kenan also writes that the constructs that we call characters "are by no means human beings in the literal sense of the word, [but] they are partly modelled on the reader's conception of people and in this they are person-like" (33). What Rimmon-Kenan refers to is a mimetic level of character construction, and this aspect makes it possible for the reader to form an attitude based on both sympathy and judgement when reading the text (see Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* 93-108). In other words: we read a poem *as if* the speaker was a person, while we are also conscious of the poet's consciousness, as Robert Langbaum suggests (*The Poetry of Experience* 94). In my reading, the consciousness of the reader of any text in which characters are constructed includes the awareness that something is constructed as a part of the text; this "something" is the actor/character/agent in the poem, to mention only a few terms which all refer to different aspects of the same construct. In mask lyrics, the poet constructs an actor/character/agent by using the method of the mask. The commonly used metaphor "the poet is wearing a mask" refers to this complicated process rather than to simply covering something that was already there.

---

(and obeys grammar). Examples of the former are James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner; of the latter, 19<sup>th</sup>-century narratives, such as Jane Austen's *Emma* (44-45).

George Santayana writes: “Our animal habits are transmuted by conscience into loyalties and duties, and we become ‘persons’ or masks” (qtd. in Goffman, *The Presentation* 65). Is it the act of creating our own masks that makes us “persons”, that is, human beings? The question is highly ambiguous: in a thoroughgoing study, Gordon Allport mentions fifty different meanings of the Latinate words “person” and “persona”. If we define “person” as a social construct, role playing and creating masks should be considered as cultural processes that will result in performing a role *as a person*. The process can also be seen as identification and the result as the social identity or the ego identity as outlined by Erving Goffman (*Stigma* 129-130).

Importantly, both Santayana the philosopher and Goffman the social psychologist discuss “human beings in the literal sense of the word”, to quote Rimmon-Kenan’s phrasing. A speaker in a poem is not a person, but is *like* a person, and ignoring this mimetic level would obviously deprive the reader of a relevant aspect of the meaning. A relevant aspect, but not the only aspect; one should remember that a literary character consists of the words and only the words that refer to it in the text. (Typically, when focusing on this side of character, one uses the pronoun “it” rather than “s/he”.) Consequently, a mask in a poem is not the same as a mask in social existence. The differences between the two are as significant as the identity of the word that we use to refer to them.

Discussing the general features of dramatic monologues and mask lyrics, Glennis Byron points out that in recent literary criticism the major question is *how* something is created as a text: “The emphasis moves from what is ‘expressed’ to what is constructed, from what the text means to how the text works, from what is represented to ways of representation. It also leads to a consideration of the dramatic monologue [in the wide sense, including mask lyrics] in terms of performance” (26). Following Byron’s point, I suggest that what is performed in the poem that we read as a mask lyric is the mask itself.

Mask in poetry has been defined in a number of ways: as a means of creating a more authentic self than the actual social self of the poet (Oscar Wilde), as a manifestation of the anti-I and the target of desire (W. B. Yeats), as a medium of communication with the reader (T. S. Eliot), and one could go down the list. These are all concepts of textually constructed masks, but none of them is independent from mask as a person, as a cultural construct. The three poets I have mentioned as examples conceptualized their notions of mask in terms of life (social existence) rather than in reference to pure poetry. Oscar Wilde was interested in how life and art were related to each other and how masks mediated between the two; Yeats dealt

with mask as an actual entity in his intricate system based on occultism; Eliot struggled with his own ambivalent attitude to hiding and showing himself.

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century interest in the creation of masks and the poetry based on it is closely linked with the growing tendency to investigate the unconscious, often manifest in research into, or representation of, early infancy and madness. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century this was followed by the development of both technical devices and cultural techniques affecting the textual construction of masks in literature. In the late 1960s Jonathan Raban wrote: “The tape recorder has made us listen to the way that people speak with a new sensitivity, both dialogue and narrative have been stimulated to a greater accuracy in echoing the exact tones of the spoken word” (12). Thirty-five years later Glennis Byron comments: “The growing familiarity of the public with variations on monologue conventions [e.g. political speeches and alcoholics’ self-revelations] may well have contributed to making the poetic form of the dramatic monologue particularly accessible” (132). Although Byron makes this point as a hypothesis (“may well have contributed”), she draws our attention to the strategy most readers apply when understanding a mask lyric or a dramatic monologue: we tend to use non-literary texts as analogies, and we wish to detect the story behind the mask. We want to construct a narrative that is never made explicit, but always hinted at.

To put it another way, we are conscious that appearances are deceptive, and we want to see more than a fictitious character in a fictitious situation does. As Goffman, speaking as a social psychologist, put it: “In general [...] the representation of an activity will vary in some degree from the activity itself and therefore inevitably misrepresent it” (*The Presentation* 72). Our activity is misrepresented because we use masks in the social games of defending our integrity. William Empson wrote: “The object of life, after all, is not to understand things, but to maintain one’s defences and equilibrium...” (qtd. in Bowman 173). Literature, on the one hand, imitates such games of defence; on the other hand, it subverts the models of equilibrium to construct new structures of human intimacy (cf. Nyilasy 53). This is particularly important in poetry. The reader of a poem gains insight into and forms a judgement of the undermining of such games by perceiving the culture that is performed in the text. To accept an act of revolt, first we need to see the rigid structure it aims at debunking.

A mask in poetry represents both the social games that a poem reconstructs and the act of its subversion. In an earlier study, I defined the method of making masks as a principle in the process of identity construction, which creates a temporary, conscious and artificial unity between the implied poet (the internal self) and the actual author (the external self). Unity is constructed, since the real poet transforms him/herself into a mask (i.e. a different “person”)



in the text, while s/he also makes role-playing itself explicit. This unity of the two selves is *temporary*, since it only exists in one poem or one sequence; it is *conscious*, because the poet emphasizes both the identity and the difference between the two selves; and it is *artificial* in the sense of existing in art (D. Rácz 27-28). Mask is as paradoxical as the reader's attitude to mask lyrics and dramatic monologues, and the complexity of the culture they perform can only be seen through this paradox. As Glennis Byron suggests, such poems are written "to expose the conflicting and multiple positions through which the self can be situated and emphasize the ways in which this self is produced by various socioeconomic and linguistic systems" (135).

As is well known, mask lyrics and dramatic monologues developed to become central forms in British poetry in the Victorian age; poets used this genre to give evidence of "the illusory nature of the autonomous and unified Romantic subject" (Byron 3). What had been self-controlled became diverse and elusive; what had been static became dynamic. One consequence is that in later poetry, particularly in the post-1945 era, narratives play an increasingly important role even in lyric and dramatic poetry. In their introduction to an anthology of poems, Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison point out that in recent poetry one can notice a renewed interest in narrative; Ian Gregson also mentions "the effects of novelisation" in contemporary poetry (Crawford and Kinlock 30). In my reading, this tendency is a symptom of the construction of dialogicity in poems: by using a narrative (but not necessarily telling a story) the poet constructs his/her other in the form of a mask.

#### 2.4.2. *Masks and Monologues in Larkin*

Larkin started writing literary texts with experiments in narrative and dramatic forms. In the Brunette Coleman novellas he constructed the mask of a liberal and lesbian woman writer; in his letters to friends and some texts for his diaries he used dialogues to represent his inner conflicts. These experiments continued and were further developed not only in his two novels but also (and more significantly) in his mature poetry.

From the beginning of his writing career he was conscious of the distinction between various forms of first-person lyrics. R. J. C. Watt gives an account of one of the only two public readings Larkin ever gave of his own poetry (St John's College, Oxford, in November 1974). Watt writes: "He began by telling us that he had chosen to read the personal poems, not those in which he assumes a persona" ("Scragged" 173). This reveals that Larkin was

aware that the two attitudes towards showing and hiding himself in the poem (which I referred to in the previous chapter) existed simultaneously. The ambition “to write the truth” without being different from his actual self (*FR* 23) and “to write *different* kinds of poems, that might be by different people” (qtd. in Motion, *Philip Larkin*, Contemporary Writers ser. 74, emphasis in the original) do not exclude each other: they are two different methods, which result in (at least) two different types of poetry.

In his satirical dramatic monologues Larkin constructs a persona he makes ridiculous with the speaker’s language use (“Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses”, “Posterity”); in his mask lyrics he transforms his actual self into the desired other (“Wedding Wind”). In the first group the reader is encouraged to join the author in forming a moral judgement and taking a superior position; in the second, s/he will enjoy the benefit of insight into the mind of the persona. As I pointed out previously, these are only the predominating attitudes in a possible reading strategy: judgement and insight are important and complementary in both cases. In a number of texts the speaker is explicitly a performer: he is often an actor entering a dialogue (“Mr Bleaney”, “Dockery and Son”, “Self’s the Man” “Vers de Société”, etc.), revealing gestures of cool observation and sympathy. This way, he also becomes a metonymy (or a guide) of the reader.

In Larkin, however, a third type of poem is just as important. This is the form that I referred to as dramatic lyric in the Introduction and at the end of Chapter 2.2. As Rader suggests, in such poems an experience is re-created, “more accurately, its significance is recreated” (143). The poet is represented by an actor in the poem, and s/he discovers something in an experience; Rader’s examples are Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”, Arnold’s “Dover Beach”, Hopkins’s “The Windhover”, Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush” and Frost’s “Stopping by Woods” (142). According to Rader, there are two agents in such poems: the poet and the actor. The represented figure does not speak, but performs a cognitive act.

Although Rader’s typology calls attention to the pattern of a very important type of poem, his description seems imprecise. I agree with him inasmuch as we need to distinguish between two agents in the poem. He also points out accurately that in such poems the reader can always discern two units: the first represents the spontaneous perception of an experience, the second its profound understanding. But instead of trying to map the relationship between the actual author and the speaker in the poem (which would inevitably lead to a biographical reading), I find it more important to explore the relationship between the two agents within the poem. Departing from Rader, I suggest that cognition, as an event of the poet’s

consciousness, is manifest only in the second unit of such texts. I would not identify the speaker constructed in this unit with the poet, as Rader does, even though the voice that we hear is a representation of the implied author. In my definition a dramatic lyric is a poem in which the speaker is polarized into two “selves”: a perceptive and a cognitive agent. In the first unit the speaker perceives something that will become experience in his consciousness; in this part of the poem the reader can usually notice that verbs of sensation predominate. In the second unit the cognitive agent aims at understanding the experience by considering both the original situation perceived in the first part and his/her own former self: the perceptive agent. In this part of the poem verbs and other lexical units of cognition are typical.

“Coming” in *The Less Deceived* is a case in point. This is a poem representing the poet-figure as moved by the power of nature. The title is enigmatic: grammatically, the word “coming” can be interpreted either as a gerund or a present participle. It may mean ‘arriving’ or ‘next’, but it can also refer to the second coming, that is Jesus’s parousia. Since this word is not used again in the text (the phrase “comes on” in line 15 only evokes a distant echo of it) the scope of such latent meanings is not narrowed down.

If one reads the title as a gerund referring to the subject matter of the poem (without confining it to the religious connotation), intertextuality will become apparent. The subtext is Thomas Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush”, which was written on 31 December 1900 to greet the new century. When Larkin wrote “Coming” in early 1950, he had already chosen Hardy as his clear master. In both poems the central image is that of a thrush singing in its natural environment, and for both poets this image is an enigma to solve. As will be demonstrated below, the implied poet is re-constructed as the two agents of dramatic lyrics in both poems.

“Coming” opens with the description of a peaceful landscape and the tranquillity pervading the image:

On longer evenings,  
 Light, chill and yellow,  
 Bathes the serene  
 Foreheads of houses.  
 A thrush sings,  
 Laurel-surrounded  
 In the deep bare garden,  
 Its fresh-peeled voice  
 Astonishing the brickwork.

It will be spring soon,  
(CP 33)

This nineteen-line poem is written as one undivided stanza, but it has a turning point, also visually marked. Larkin repeats the last line of the previous quotation almost precisely in the geometrical centre of the poem:

It will be spring soon –  
And I, whose childhood  
Is a forgotten boredom,  
Feel like a child  
Who comes on a scene  
Of adult reconciling,  
And can understand nothing  
But the unusual laughter,  
And starts to be happy.  
(CP 33)

Richard T. Cauldwell offers a thoroughgoing analysis of two different observations of the poem: the reader's, as s/he finds it in a volume, and the listener's of Larkin's own reading. As reading the text was Cauldwell's first experience to be followed by listening to the tape, he started with a hypothesis made between these two experiences: he supposed that since the function of the sentence in line 11 is different from that of the same sentence in line 10, they would also be read out differently. More concretely: whereas in line 10 the new element (the rhyme) is the word "spring" and, therefore, this would be emphasized, in line 11 the main emphasis of the sentence would fall either on "will" or on "soon", to confirm the reality and closeness of spring (120).

Cauldwell's hypothesis can be supported with an analysis of the text as a speech act. A perceptive agent is constructed in the first unit. This part is dominated by words of sensation, metaphors and synaesthesia: "chill and yellow", "bathes", "fresh-peeled voice". The perceptive agent is replaced by a cognitive agent in the second part (beginning with the repeated line). Its vocabulary, significantly, includes words such as "forgotten", "reconciling", "understand". This is a moment of epiphany: the speaker suddenly understands the essence of the experience.

But Cauldwell came to a surprising conclusion in analyzing the recording. First of all, Larkin reads lines 10 and 11 in exactly the same tone, in both cases imitating a bird's voice. (Larkin was conscious of this: in his essay "The True Voice of Feeling" he wrote that the function of the *repeated* line was "to suggest the bird call" [FR 35].) Second, the last line of the poem (again, in contrast with most readers' expectations) is read without any sign of pathos. This draws attention to Cauldwell's interpretation of the last line: "there is no direct expression of happiness, it is the child who 'starts to be happy', not the poet" (120).

This phonetic-functional analysis gives evidence that Larkin's recording undermines the latent cognitive function of line 11. As indicated previously, the germ of this subversion can also be found in the printed text: if the closure of the poem suggests that happiness can be known only through a simile, this implies a lack of epiphany (which would be the traditional ending of a dramatic lyric). One could draw the conclusion that "Coming" is a disillusioned, anti-romantic poem: although the speaker feels "*like a child*", he does not *become a child*. To put it another way, the child does not become "Father of the Man", as it does in Wordsworth. But the subverted romantic meaning does not collapse completely. The implied poet is aware that it is impossible to combine the innocence of childhood and the wisdom of adulthood, but he finds the same kind of homogeneous beauty in the voice of the thrush as Wordsworth and Keats did in the rainbow.

The division of the speaker into a perceptive and a cognitive agent is characteristic of a number of further poems: "An April Sunday brings the snow", "Reasons for Attendance", "Church Going", etc. The structure based on it always represents ambiguities and the ambition of the poet to construct a plurality of perspectives.

The duality of insight and judgement is as essential in dramatic lyrics as in dramatic monologues, but (unlike in dramatic monologues) the conflict between the two aspects is represented as the inner conflict of the speaker. It is constructed in the diction of poetry, but simulates real-life situations. Erving Goffman, who describes human behaviour by using theatrical metaphors, suggests: "Our activity [...] is largely concerned with moral matters, but as performers we do not have a moral concern with them. As performers we are merchants of morality" (*The Presentation* 243). This situation is re-constructed in the dual perspective of dramatic lyrics: the self (the character performed) sees itself both from the inside and from the outside, from a moral and an amoral perspective.

As mentioned previously, Larkin was conscious of the significance that such dualities bear. He also developed literary techniques in which inner conflicts can be polarized and projected. Discussing one of Larkin's unfinished novels, Richard Bradford writes:

In *No for an Answer* the text becomes energized by exchanges between characters, and the inspiration for this was a technique which Larkin and Amis had discussed since 1943 and named in their letters as pattern conversations. A successful pattern conversation would involve an exchange in which each character discloses something in their manner of speech without directly stating it. The reader recognizes the subtext but it is up to the writer to decide whether or not the other fictional characters detect it. (81)

This is a technique that Larkin made use of in all the forms discussed previously, most explicitly in dramatic monologues.

Despite asserting that his poetry was about his own life, Larkin was aware that character construction is as important in his lyric poetry as it is in his fiction. The character may be “Larkin playing the role of Larkin” (Lerner, *Philip Larkin* 40) or “the man next door” (Alvarez 20-21) to mention the most frequent type of character in Larkin’s verse, often falsely identified with the actual author. At the opposite end of the scale we find the mask of women. They are so important in constructing the mask as the gendered other that Nicholas Marsh’s remark seems to do little more than echo the cliché of Larkin the misogynist<sup>2</sup>: “My own feeling is that women as human beings are absent from Larkin’s poems. Women figure as objects to be viewed, contemplated, resented, defiled or attacked...” (107). Although women as objects of male desire are no doubt important as subject matter and images in Larkin, there are still two problems with Marsh’s suggestion.

First, it ignores the poems in which the speaker is a woman. The most important of these is “Wedding Wind”, but one should also remember the early “Sugar and Spice” poems, whose fictitious author is Brunette Coleman, constructed as the speaking subject (rather than object) of the texts. But in other poems the position of the observer does not exclude sympathy or empathy either. Marsh does not deny the presence of sympathy in “Deceptions” (148), but still relegates this text to the group of those poems that simply objectify the woman figure (107). In my reading, what Larkin does is to form the missing character of Mayhew’s text. As I pointed out in Chapter 2.2, Larkin breaks with the practice of the Victorian middle-class male author, who reports that the victimized woman speaks and confesses as a sinner.

---

<sup>2</sup> Since this study is about Larkin’s poetics, not his personality or biography, I will not discuss the problem of his misogyny as allegedly manifest in his private letters. Anthony Thwaite treats these as the representation of Larkin’s “instinctive rancorous impatience with himself and the world” (46).

Mayhew makes her say “I’ve no character” (83); Larkin gives counter-evidence to this statement. In his text the woman becomes a literary hero in a miniature narrative. To use Bakhtin’s phrase, what links the author and the hero is sympathetic co-experiencing. Although the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century prostitute is not constructed as a mask (unlike Mayhew, Larkin does not make her speak), she is treated as a subject.

Second, in the early 1940s, as a young man Larkin wanted to be a girl<sup>3</sup>; the clearest manifestation of this tendency are the Coleman stories, but it can also be seen in “I see a girl dragged by the wrists”, a poem published in *The North Ship* (see James Booth’s introduction to *Trouble at Willow Gables* X). The female point of view is reinforced by the intertextuality of such texts: the immense influence of popular schoolgirl fiction. As Marion Lomax has pointed out, it is unmistakable even in Larkin’s mature poetry; in “Forget What Did” he assumes the persona of a young woman writing diary entries (39-40). As I mentioned in the Introduction, in a more recent study Terry Castle also reads Larkin’s lesbian texts (not only the Brunette Coleman novellas, but also his first published novel, *Jill*) in the context of contemporary schoolgirl fiction. He agrees with those who think that male interest in lesbianism means the desire *to be* the lesbian: he points out in his discussion of *Jill* that the protagonist, John Kemp, who dreams up a girl and finds her incarnation in reality, “both wants to *have* Jill and to *be* Jill” (102). His thesis, however, is completely different from those who have attacked Larkin for his supposed perversity and obscenity: “To be interested in lesbianism is to be interested in women” (85), and he gives ample evidence of how this interest in *women’s perspective* is manifested in Larkin’s fiction and poetry.

However, Larkin’s most frequent mask is that of the middle-class, middle-aged civil servant. We could well ask: since Larkin himself was in this category, why should we call such characters masks? The answer is twofold. First, the speakers in the poem need to be textually constructed; they are not mechanical reflections of the actual poet. If one compares some of Larkin’s major poems presenting similar personae, one will find that they are different on closer inspection. The comic character in “Self’s the Man” is not the same as the sad bachelor of “Mr Bleaney”; the nearly didactic chronicler in “To the Sea” is different from the angry and obscene prophet of “This Be The Verse”. Second, the construction of masks and playing roles is a part of the social games we play; consequently, even if Larkin’s

---

<sup>3</sup> More precisely: he wanted to be a flirtatious girl. Alfred Adler describes this as a form of superiority complex (79). It will be remembered that Larkin’s desire was not manifest in his everyday behaviour, only in his texts.

ambition was “to be himself” in the poems, he had to find a self that is always already covered with a mask. Goffman’s explanation is illuminating:

A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished and well articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be realized. (*The Presentation* 81)

Goffman also quotes Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, in which the author describes a waiter “playing at being a waiter” (82). Even though Larkin was not familiar with Goffman and Sartre, his poetry demonstrates that he was fully aware of the phenomenon they discussed. In his poetry he constructed his own mask: that of a sad, witty and agnostic subject.



## 2.5. Hardy-esque Larkin: Pain in Agnostic Narratives

In the previous chapters I attempted to explore some forces of cohesion in Larkin's poetics: the priority of experience, the distinction between beauty and truth, non-literariness and the simultaneous presence of confessionalism and masks. In this chapter I will demonstrate that pain, as the most important experience in human life, is not only a cohesive force in his poetics, but also a subject matter that pervades Larkin's life work and largely determines the structure of his poems. I will focus on three topics that are overtly associated with pain and suffering in his texts: the failure of initiation, the terror of death and the impossibility of accepting religion. Since Larkin wrote more about this topic in his verse than in his essays and letters, I will focus on some of his poems, but I will discuss them as manifestations of his credo as a writer.

The representation of pain (mainly psychic and spiritual pain) is one of the methods Larkin used consciously, and he also selected his models from among those artists who focused on suffering as a subject matter. John Osborne comments:

“[Negro jazz musicians] provided the best available role model for Larkin's own poetic project of transfiguring suffering into aesthetic pleasure, pain into beauty. Hence, his tendency to equate jazz with the blues and to choose his musical heroes accordingly. (44)

But the most important model for Larkin was Hardy. In an essay he wrote:

[T]he presence of pain in Hardy's novels is a positive, not a negative, quality—not the mechanical working out of some predetermined allegiance to pessimism or any other concept, but the continual imaginative celebration of what is both the truest and the most important element in life, most important in the sense of most necessary to spiritual development. (*RW* 172-173)

In another essay he referred to the philosophical background: as opposed to Eduard von Hartmann, in Hardy's theory “consciousness will refine the Will, whose aims in consequence will no longer be inseparable from pain...” (*FR* 177). It is easy to see that when describing Hardy, Larkin also characterized himself: moreover, he produced an element for his never-to-be-written theory of poetry. He refused the Victorian label “pessimism”, a term that was

applied to Hardy as a writer who failed to see continuity between God, Nature and culture, and as a thinker who questioned the existence of God. Hardy's characters develop intellectually *because* they suffer. Tess's pains (both physical and psychic) are justified by the cathartic moment of experiencing unselfish love and approaching a "less deceived" position (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*); Jude in *Jude the Obscure* and Clym in *The Return of the Native* both let suffering and pain enrich their intellect. Numerous examples could be cited from Hardy's poetry, too: both the pain of disillusionment and the representation of the uncanny help the implied poet to colonize new regions of spiritual existence.

*The Less Deceived* is the title of Larkin's first mature volume of poetry, which gained sudden and unexpected success in 1955. The title poem, "Deceptions" (originally entitled "The Less Deceived") contains the aphorism that is a corner stone in his poetics: "suffering is exact" (CP 32). In the context of the poem this means that physical pain results in an insight that cannot be achieved through joy. Pain and joy are contrasted in Larkin as knowledge and ignorance. This antagonism (which is never resolved in his texts) results in the sharp focus on the three topics that I indicated previously, for the following reasons. 1. The paradox of gaining insight through pain is that it also prevents the subject from being initiated into adult society. 2. The consciousness of death, which is the ultimate result of pain, sets the limits to the knowledge gained through suffering: death is both an ontological and epistemological end. 3. Identifying suffering as the only road leading to knowledge is a traditionally religious approach to the problem of human understanding, but Larkin's agnosticism (which he shared with Hardy) prevented him from finding consolation in it. These three consequences of pain as "a positive quality" are richly problematized in his fiction and poetry.

### 2.5.1. *The Lack of Initiation*

In a chapter about images of identity in Larkin's poetry, John Osborne draws the conclusion: "For Larkin, at the point of origin there is always already repetition; or, to put it another way, there is no moment of inauguration that will allow us to arrive where we started and discover who we are" (*Larkin, Ideology* 226). Osborne's point is relevant: Larkin's protagonists are frequently lost in the maze that they hope will lead them back to the past. What is even more painful for them is that they also fail when they want to be initiated into adult society in the present. It is not only the insight into their past that is blocked but also the door to a promising future.

As is well known, at the beginning of his career Larkin was unsure whether his main field would be poetry or fiction.<sup>1</sup> After some early poems (in *The North Ship* and magazines) he published two novels: *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter*. In both texts Larkin constructed masks and enlarged on the problem of initiation. In the context of his life work, his early fiction can be regarded as a preliminary study before he started writing his mature verse. More than that, the two novels also summarize various elements of the theory he never wrote but always kept in mind.

First of all, he struggled with the problem of confessionalism versus detachment. In a letter written while he was working on *Jill* he complained: “But I really and truly wish it wasn’t set in Oxford; I somehow find it impossible to construct sincere and interesting conversations between human beings who are *in statu pupillari*” (SL 73). Eventually he solved the problem by creating a mask.

The central character of *Jill*, John Kemp, is a mask in the sense I outlined in the previous chapter, similarly to Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce’s novels. Kemp is a passive and inhibited figure in the extreme, but we can witness his *Bildung*: as Andrew Motion writes, his development is “from shy ‘unfocused’ feelings to explicit self-awareness” (*Philip Larkin*. Contemporary Writers ser. 49). His most obvious feature is obsession: the girl called Jill is only constructed in his imagination (the same way Larkin invented Brunette Coleman), and he writes a diary and letters through her mask (again, as Larkin did when he was wearing Brunette’s mask). Later he “recognizes” Jill in a real girl. Kemp manages to get rid of his obsession before it drives him mad, but does not succeed in his struggle against his inferiority complex, passivity and inhibitions. His initiation into adult society is not completed: he is stuck half-way. At the end of the novel we see Kemp climbing out of a pond into which he has been ducked: a grotesque and parodic version of an initiation ritual. The result is not carnivalesque laughter; it is the prospect of having to face a life of inactivity.

*Jill* is a novel with a third-person narration and a limited point of view (in the sense the term is applied for Henry James’s fiction). *A Girl in Winter* is a first-person narrative, an internal monologue. The heroine, Katherine Lind is also a mask, but she is formed as the desired other. This way, she is the counterpart of John Kemp: a young girl anticipating a life

---

<sup>1</sup> Both Hardy and Larkin started as novelists and ended up as poets. This similarity is obvious, but for the purpose of this study not particularly relevant.

of activity. Although she is a foreigner<sup>2</sup>, her *Bildung* results in initiation, and the novel ends with a vision of coming gladness and order.

The circle is full. John Kemp uses his writing skills to replace reality with a world of imagination, which prevents him from being initiated into a society he is separated from. Katherine Lind comes from the unknown, and acquires a foreign language, which enables her to be initiated into adulthood. Both characters witness and experience pain (John as a victim of humiliation, Katherine as an observer and a helper), which largely contributes to their self-awareness.

In the poem “Deceptions” (CP 32) a Victorian girl is raped, and the immediate result is a feeling of pain. In the epigraph quoted from Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* she says, “I was ruined”, indicating that her suffering means not only physical pain, but also her lack of initiation into society. The violent act has also determined her fate as a prostitute, her life as a social outcast. When in the original Mayhew text (not a part of the epigraph) she says, “I’ve no character” (83), the Victorian male author makes her declare a lack of identity. To use Erving Goffman’s term, she does not have an ego identity.

Goffman distinguishes between three kinds of identity, and their application to Larkin’s fiction and poetry illuminates his images of initiation. *Social identity*, as Goffman defines the phrase, is the range of those roles and profiles that the social environment feels it permissible “for any given individual to sustain”. *Personal identity* means the image that the individual creates her/himself through her/his information control (*Stigma* 82). In the case of “Deceptions”, the pain the girl feels (and the pain the male poet *wants* to feel) shapes her social identity; the way she uses the memory of this pain already represents her personal identity at work. Goffman’s third category, *ego identity*, is different from both: this is the subjective sense of any individual’s “own situation and his own continuity and character that an individual comes to obtain as a result of his various social experiences” (*Stigma* 129). When the girl in Mayhew’s book says that she has no character, she is speaking about the lack of ego identity. (More precisely: the male author pretends that she is speaking to this effect.) In other words: she is not initiated into society.

The male speaker of Larkin’s poem, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century poet figure, however, knows that he could enrich himself both epistemologically and ontologically by sharing her pain:

---

<sup>2</sup> In an essay published in the magazine of the Philip Larkin Society, Carol Rumens suggests that she is “very probably German. It also seems likely that she is Jewish” (“Distance and difference” 11). Interestingly, in the same issue of *About Larkin*, John Osborne points out that Katherine has been “categorically” identified as French, German and Polish by various authors. I agree with Osborne: “the novel has a thematic purpose in *keeping readers guessing* as to Katherine’s origins” (Letter 29, emphasis in the original), without disclosing the secret.

Even so distant, I can taste the grief,  
 Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.  
 The sun's occasional print, the brisk brief  
 Worry of wheels along the street outside  
 Where bridal London bows the other way,  
 And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,  
 Forbids the scar to heal, and drives  
 Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day  
 Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives.

In the first line of the poem the synaesthesia "I can taste the grief" is a symbolic wish fulfilment: if he can feel the same pain as the girl, he is also in the "less deceived" position. The vivid representation of painful tasting (bitterness is mentioned in line 2) and touching (see images of sharpness and pressing in lines 2 and 3) eventually lead to visions of pain caused by violence and surgery. In line 7 we read about a scar that does not heal, and in the last line of stanza 1 the simile recalls the image of a brain operation. "Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives" is the kind of simile that constructs a meaning and rejects it. Most readers will probably notice the dominance of the lexical units *mind*, *open* and *knives* before recognizing them as the tenor and the vehicle of a trope. Somebody's mind can be hurt or operated on with a knife, and this notion is reinforced by at least two elements in the poem. One is the representation of a violent act: the scar that will not heal is both physical and mental. The other is the activity of the implied poet: what he carries out is a symbolic vivisection. This is not simply the male gaze of Mayhew's 20<sup>th</sup>-century reader, but also his desperate attempt to "taste the grief", that is to feel the pain. This desire makes it possible for him to free his creative energy and write a poem.

As opposed to the images of violence and *causing* pain in the first stanza, in stanza 2 visions of *enduring* pain predominate. This represents both a failure and a success for the speaker:

Slums, years have buried you. I would not dare  
 Console you if I could. What can be said,  
 Except that suffering is exact, but where  
 Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?

For you would hardly care  
 That you were less deceived, out on that bed,  
 Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair  
 To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic.

When in line 1 he says that the years “have buried” the girl, he also suggests that he cannot unearth her pain: that is also buried with her. The tension is not simply between a marginalized working-class woman and a middle-class man, but also between a suffering protagonist and a writer who is a parasite of her pain. The last two lines (charged with images of violent sexuality both in the narration and in the figures of speech) are powerful and embarrassing at the same time. Apart from blaming the rape on sexual drive (“Desire takes charge” in line 4), this stanza also shows the implied poet’s failure to know more about the girl than her suffering. (In Chapter 2.2 I referred to this in another context.) Different readers have drawn and will draw different conclusions from Larkin’s attitude constructed in this poem. In my reading, the poet uses someone else’s pain (as a major experience) to understand what suffering is. This pain is transformed into the energy that enables him to write the poem, but the speaker is not initiated into the adult world any more than the prostitute of the poem was. Sharing this marginalized position with the girl is both Larkin’s failure and success. Whereas Mayhew did not hesitate to make the girl speak a language of morality, Larkin knows that making her speak would only lead to further humiliation. Her tragedy is that she does not have the power to master language (only two male authors speak for her); consequently, she is not initiated into adulthood. (Her prostitution means an unchangeable, marginalized position.) The writer’s tragedy is that he cannot help it.<sup>3</sup>

### 2.5.2. *The Consciousness of Death*

In “Deceptions” Larkin asks the question: “What can be said?” The title of a key poem from his next volume, *The Whitsun Weddings*, comes as an answer: “Nothing To Be Said” (*CP* 138). Pain in this poem is an underlying factor of human life rather than something overtly depicted. The juxtaposition of archaic tribes and families living in modern civilization leads

---

<sup>3</sup> James Booth’s biographical reading is completely different from mine, but it confirms my view that the poem can be read as a representation of the writer’s suffering. Booth reads “Deceptions” as an allegorical apology to Ruth Bowman (*Philip Larkin: The Poet’s Plight* 63).

the speaker to the only common denominator: death. We are humans because we are conscious of “the only end of age”:

For nations vague as weed,  
 For nomads among stones,  
 Small-statured cross-faced tribes  
 And cobble-close families  
 In mill-towns on dark mornings  
 Life is slow dying.

The Cartesian *cogito* is replaced by an ontological *doleo*. Stanza 1 seems to say: *Doleo ergo sum*<sup>4</sup>, that is “I suffer, therefore I am”. One should add straightaway: pain in this poem is not a target of representation. It is not mentioned, since it has been suppressed and lingers in our unconscious. In my reading, this understatement is an important constituent of the poem, as I hope to show in the discussion of the second stanza.

To be able to endure the terror of death and to enable ourselves to conceive of human life not merely as continuous suffering, we break with the philosophy that perceives everything from the end. Human life can be seen as a substance or a medium in which the aims of the individual become autonomous and create their own strategies. As Larkin’s speaker suggests in stanza 2: of course, what we live for is not death, but “building, benediction, / Measuring love and money”. This idea is confirmed in another image juxtaposing primitive and civilized human existence with two literary allusions: William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (in “hunting pig”) and Katherine Mansfield’s “The Garden Party” (Smith 263). The implication is that the strategies of distracting our attention from death are no more than metonymies of human life advancing “On death equally slowly”:

So are their separate ways  
 Of building, benediction,  
 Measuring love and money  
 Ways of slow dying.  
 The day spent hunting pig  
 Or holding a garden-party,

---

<sup>4</sup> I have borrowed the pun from the Hungarian poet Gyula Illyés. His poem with this title, however, is completely different from Larkin’s.

Hours giving evidence  
 Or birth, advance  
 On death equally slowly.

Some readers may find it astonishing that the speaker in this poem speaks in the third person (as opposed to “Deceptions”, where he uses an apostrophe to address the girl). He talks about human beings as if he was not one of them, as if we heard the voice of a god who is present through his absence. This nameless and nondescript god makes declarations about the miserable process called human life, and he seems to be aware that apart from living their lives human beings are also able to speak, that is to use language. In my reading, there is a gap, an unasked question before the last three lines of the text: what happens if human beings also speak about the misery of their lives? This is tacitly and categorically answered in the closure:

And saying so to some  
 Means nothing; others it leaves  
 Nothing to be said.

We can speak about death, but those who speak about it do not understand it, and those who can understand it do not speak about it. This is the ultimate psychic pain of human life.

In Chapter 2.2 I quoted David Lodge, who referred to Wittgenstein in his reading of Larkin. The end of the poem discussed above seems to be a nodding at the German philosopher: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen”, that is “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (188-189). The attitude is the same as that recognized by Richard Rorty in a different Larkin poem: he chooses the perspective of the philosopher instead of the “strong poet” (25).

The final paradox of the poem is constructed in the silence following the last line: this is exactly what the implied poet has been *speaking* about. If we read “Deceptions” and “Nothing To Be Said” together, we can come to the conclusion that in his struggle with language Larkin can only face human pain and continuous suffering from the outside. “What can be said?”—he asks in the previous poem. “Nothing”, he answers here, because you can verbalize pain only if you are outside of the situation. But this also prevents us from speaking authentically about it.



The consciousness of this paradox is manifest in the construction of monologues, mask lyrics and dramatic lyrics as outlined in the previous chapter (2.4). Larkin's aim, of course, is not to solve the paradox; instead he represents it as something unsolvable by definition.

### 2.5.3. Religion and Agnosticism

We human beings can say nothing about the fundamental questions of life and death, but in conventional and institutionalized religions God speaks through those people (usually men) who call themselves his servants, for example priests or ministers. Larkin struggled with the problem of religion as a possible means of easing the pain of human existence and offering a prospect of life after death. Although he did not accept the dogmas of Christianity—or any other religion—he never entirely ceased to feel its attraction. This is what his often cited poem “Church Going” is about, and he represents religion as a commercialized pain-killing practice in “Faith Healing” (CP 126). The protagonist is an American faith healer, who uses his supposed supernatural power to help a long queue of women:

*Now dear child,*  
*What's wrong,* the deep American voice demands,  
 And, scarcely pausing, goes into prayer  
 Directing God about this eye, that knee.

These women are similar to the girl in “Deceptions” inasmuch as they also associate physical pain with losing innocence and leaving childhood behind. They may have been initiated into society, but they do not want it:

... as if a kind of dumb  
 And idiot child within them survives  
 To re-awake at kindness...

Their pain reminds them of the misery of their lives without love. Larkin uses the oxymoron “immense slackening ache” in the last sentence of the poem: pain may be eased but not killed.

The position of the speaker is as detached as it is in “Nothing To Be Said”. The experience forming the basis of this poem is a film that Larkin saw, and the position of the speaker can easily be identified as a person watching a film (Rossen 43). Instead of wanting to share the women’s pains, he observes them coolly. Janice Rossen has rightly observed that the faith healer in the poem is American, and his victims are all women (43-44). What still saves the poem from being embarrassing (even male chauvinistic or a representative of little Englandism) is the position of the film viewer. This is what most readers will find it possible to identify with, since we all know that the film will end soon, and we want to live in love. The poem eventually urges the reader to become “less deceived” than the women queuing up for the faith healer. Larkin’s speaker, once again, draws the conclusion and manifests the poet’s credo: you cannot speak about suffering from the inside, you need to keep distance. Whenever the poet writes about pain and suffering, he admits that he cannot speak directly about them. This is demonstrated by the frequent use of similes and other forms of aesthetic distance: the monologue form, the polarization of the implied poet and the detachment of the experience.

In a later poem about religion, “The Explosion” (*CP* 175) an unasked question still is: are the women in the poem deceived? In this text Larkin constructs the tone of an impersonal ballad singer<sup>5</sup>, who tells the story of a group of miners dying as a result of an explosion. At the funeral their wives have a vision of them, live and intact. Even the lark’s eggs that one of them picked before the explosion are unbroken:

... for a second  
 Wives saw men of the explosion  
  
 Larger than in life they managed –  
 Gold as on coin, or walking  
 Somehow from the sun towards them,  
  
 One showing the eggs unbroken.

This enigmatic closure makes the poem open to at least two very different readings. Those who read it in a religious context interpret the wives’ vision as evidence of afterlife; those

---

<sup>5</sup> Larkin’s chief models were 19<sup>th</sup>-century ballads about disasters in mines, but the Finnish epic *Kalevala* and Longfellow’s *The Song of Hiawatha* also influenced the poem (Hollindale 140-143).

who refuse religion read the vision as an image of deception. Both are based on the psychic pain felt by the women on losing their husbands. Religion eases this pain whether it is a make-believe game or not. The poet can only represent it as an outsider: as a ballad singer he cannot be a part of the situation.

If we read “Faith Healing” and “The Explosion” in the context of the life work, we find that Larkin’s personae are always *outsiders* when they consider a religious situation with other people (usually members of a congregation) present. (By outsider I mean somebody detached from the human situation represented in the poem; moreover, somebody who does not show any sign of belonging to culture in general.) However, the speaker is *inside* (within a dramatic situation provoking metaphysical questions) when no one else is there, and in this way Larkin can construct an agnostic alter ego in the poem without confronting other people. In “Aubade”, for example, he declares that religion as a means of easing the psychic pain, caused by the consciousness of death, is both obsolete and faux-naïve: it is a “vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die” (CP 208).

In “Church Going” the persona enters a church, because he is interested in his own reactions and motivation. Tradition is important for him in two senses: the non-literary tradition of his culture and his own personal history. One of the most important cultural traditions, religion as a possible practice to ease pain, is alluded to in stanza 4. After he asks the question “When churches fall completely out of use / What we shall turn them into” (using a universal “we”, meaning humankind) one possible answer comes in the form of a vision projected into the future:

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;  
Pick simples for a cancer;

Touching the stone to kill pain or cure a child signifies the same attitude to religion as the women show in “Faith Healing”: unconditioned belief and devotion. The speaker adds another reason why people in the future might want to visit the ruins of a church:

or on some  
Advised night see walking a dead one?  
(CP 97)

The motivation to see a ghost is not only curiosity but also the wish to drive away the psychic pain caused by fear. Facing death would drive the terror away. However, death cannot be faced in poetry since it is not a verbal experience: the question in the poem is ironic, the human figures in the future will not see “walking a dead one”; there will be no mediation between the living and the dead. The image of the ghost is echoed in “Aubade”, where the allegorical figure of death is “A small unfocused blur”, which can hardly be seen “just on the edge of vision”. Humans, therefore, are left with the “furnace-fear” as they cannot see what death is. What we are afraid of is the unknown.

The model of such images, once again, is Hardy. Ghost images and mystical visitations are frequent in his poetry, but always without the hope of a mystical union with God or a transcendental world. Question marks are just as important as later in Larkin:

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,  
 Standing as when I drew near to the town  
 Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,  
 Even to the original air-blue gown!

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness  
 Travelling across the wet mead to me here,  
 You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness  
 Heard no more again far or near?  
 (“The Voice” in *The Works* 325-26)

The interrogative form is even more significant when the ghost is his own future self. In “Afterwards” all the questions are about future conversations, where the speaking subject is turned into a mute object in other people’s talk. The poem is a self-elegy<sup>6</sup>, in which, as James Booth has written, the implied poet “imagines him or herself, irrationally, as a spectator at his or her own deathbed” (*The Poet’s Plight* 192). Larkin draws the conclusion in “Aubade”: all questions about dying are vain “arid interrogation” (*CP* 208).

These examples demonstrate that the psychic pain felt over the subject’s forthcoming death is not only a target of representation but also an organizing principle in Hardy and Larkin. Human suffering caused by the consciousness of mortality can be experienced only in

---

<sup>6</sup> Booth distinguishes between three modes of elegy: mourning elegy, meditative or reflective elegy, and self-elegy (*The Poet’s Plight* 172).

a state of loneliness, and only this condition can make us “less deceived”. The neo-platonic author Marsilio Ficino wrote:

[W]e think that we can expel our hidden and continual grief through the society of others and through a manifold variety of pleasures. But we are only too deceived. For in the midst of the plays of pleasures we sigh at times, and when the plays are over, we depart even more sorrowful. [...] But while all are deceived, usually those are *less deceived* who at some time, as happens occasionally during sleep, become suspicious and say to themselves: “Perhaps those things are not true which now appear to us; perhaps we are now dreaming.” (qtd. in Durrant 121, emphasis added)

As both life works testify, this prevents us from being initiated into social life, but offers an insight into human existence. Although it cannot replace the function of religion, since it cannot solve the mystery of death, suffering still enriches the poet—and through the poet, the reader, too.

## 2.6. Language, Death and Transcendence

Since experience in Larkin's poetics is non-verbal by definition, death is his central subject matter as *the* non-verbal reality par excellence. Although we cannot see death face to face, we can make an attempt to understand its essence. This is only possible in a state of loneliness; socializing is a means of making the subject "more deceived". The poet, however, is responsible to experience (which needs to be preserved in poetry), and intends to give it to the reader as a gift. It follows that the wish to be isolated and the desire to be a part of a community pull the poet in two opposite directions: forces of introversion and the compulsion to openness largely determine Larkin's poetics, constructing the ambivalence that his irony is based on. Two self-reflexive poems in *The Less Deceived*, "Reasons for Attendance" and "Wants" demonstrate Larkin's dilemma.

### 2.6.1. *Experience Outside and Inside*

"Reasons for Attendance" (CP 80), like a number of other dramatic lyrics in Larkin, presents a perceptive and a cognitive agent. It is based on a sensual experience: hearing music, more precisely the voice of a trumpet. This is complemented by the vision of the "rough-tongued bell", which alludes to the trumpet-bell, as one can read in a letter by Larkin (SL 223); also a symbol of art in this context. Thus, the sight of the trumpet and its harsh sound make the topos that forms the central vision of the poem. This trumpet belongs to the mundane world (rather than to an angel, as one would expect from a conventional vision about transcendence), but those who are enchanted by the sound accept it as an authority. They also accept the situation they find themselves in as the ritual of a community longing for some kind of transcendence:

The trumpet's voice, loud and authoritative,  
 Draws me a moment to the lighted glass  
 To watch the dancers—all under twenty-five  
 Shifting intently, face to flushed face,  
 Solemnly on the beat of happiness.

The speaker of the poem stands outside the dancers' situation, and he contrasts his own attraction to art with the young people's trance, through which they hope to find happiness. One possible conclusion is the commonplace that "different people find their happiness in different ways"; and this is what the last stanza suggests—more precisely, *would* suggest if Larkin had not undermined it with the unexpected conditional sentence in the last line:

Therefore I stay outside,  
Believing this, and they maul to and fro,  
Believing that; and both are satisfied,  
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.

The ironic image of the young people represented in stanza 1 has suddenly been enriched by self-irony. Transferring irony from other subjects to the implied poet is a device that Larkin may have learnt from Kingsley Amis's poems (Tolley, *Larkin at Work* 41), such as "Something Nasty in the Bookshop", where the unexpected fifth line in the last stanza makes the whole text self-ironic in retrospect:

Deciding this, we can forget those times  
We sat up half the night  
Chock-full of love, crammed with bright thoughts,  
names, rhymes,  
And couldn't write.  
(Conquest 47)

The implication in both poems is that young people deceive themselves, but Larkin's speaker also adds: so does he, the middle-aged man. His only advantage is that he is "less deceived". This is why he eventually chooses the role of the isolated observer. He avoids being within the experience because that would prevent him from preserving it. It should be clear by now that in Larkin "experience" means the experience of a "less deceived" observer. In the "Statement" he says that he preserves it for the sake of the experience itself, elsewhere he emphasizes that it is meant as a gift for the reader. But his poetry suggests that it is also intended for the poet: a "less deceived" person is an observer, an isolated subject or a passive sufferer, who is still able to enrich himself ontologically. He preserves the beautiful, but he

knows he is excluded from it. The knowledge he gains in this way is the benefit he can enjoy by preserving experience.

Larkin's personae face (sometimes bravely, sometimes with anxiety) what they can expect from a lonely way of life, left out of such rituals as described in the poem discussed above. This is the theme of "Wants" (*CP* 42), which is completely different from "Reasons for Attendance" both in its structure and its style. This text does not begin with the construction of a familiar situation (as a typical Movement poem would); it starts with an abstract and elliptical sentence, which also serves as a frame for the first stanza:

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:  
 However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards  
 However we follow the printed directions of sex  
 However the family is photographed under the flagstaff –  
 Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.

The pronoun "this" refers to the next lines, as is signified by the colon. The desire for solitude is beyond the surface, a surface which is described in the rest of this stanza; and this description, for all appearances, is that of an everyday character in an everyday situation. The reader of this text can easily construct the figure of a clerk sitting in his study, who sees a dark sky through his window, some invitation cards and a family photo on his desk, and possibly thinks of the men's magazines in his drawer. When the first line is repeated at the end of the stanza, one will probably read it with different emphases (like in "Coming"): whereas the rhyme in the first line is "wish", in the last line it is "this" (meaning, '*this* is what the wish to be alone is beyond').

The second (and closing) stanza reiterates what the first has said:

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:  
 Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,  
 The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,  
 The costly aversions of the eyes from death –  
 Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.

The framing sentence in stanza 1 was about the desire for loneliness; here it is about the desire for nothingness in Larkin's epistemology. The desire for oblivion, the ability to forget (that is,



to construct nothingness) is, paradoxically, as dynamic as an undercurrent (as is suggested by the verb “run”). In contrast with this, the static surface is still the same as in the first stanza, with two new elements: the calendar on the desk and the documents of a life insurance policy. The phrases “tabled fertility rites” and “the costly aversions of the eyes from death” are more enigmatic, but still parts of a situation simulating reality. The former implies invitations to events that have preserved the “fertility rites” of archaic communities within civilization, but also distorted them (such as invitations to weddings); the latter refers to any kind of activity that distracts people’s attention from the only end of human life: death. The contrasts in stanza two are sharper: after the concessive conjunction “however” in stanza 1, here the disjunctive “despite” intensifies the antagonism between the superficial and the profound.

The phrase “the artful tensions of the calendar” is especially important. This vision, apart from recalling the image of a calendar as a requisite of bureaucracy, also evokes the problem of time and temporality within spatial representation. In everyday existence, we experience three essential features of time: infinity, continuity and divisibility (Bull 4). The speaker sees the latter two features as the two sides of a conflict. The adjective “artful” (primarily meaning ‘cunning’) recalls both “artistic” and “artificial”, and this suggests that the human process of splitting time into days, weeks and months is unnatural. In the speaker’s view, as the logic of this text suggests, it is the continuity of entropy resulting in death and oblivion that gains victory. The character constructed in this poem, again, is socially defined and anonymous; paradoxically, the unusual plural in the title extends an originally individual experience to all members of a community. In this figure of alienation the subject belongs to a community by separating himself.

The speakers of these two poems do not communicate with other people within the situation: one of them is peeping through a window pane (signifying the paradoxical unity of close observation and separation); the other is alone in a place where everything reminds him of human relations, including oblivion (referring not only to forgetting in general but also, in a narrower meaning, to forgiving sins in the form of amnesty). Therefore, they are able to maintain the illusion that experience is non-verbal. In other poems, words fail the speaker. Carol Rumens mentions “Deceptions” (“What can be said...”), “Love Again” (“why put it into words?”) and an early poem as examples (“Philip Larkin’s Lost Childhood” 43). One could add the very title of “Nothing To Be Said” and the closure of “High Windows” (“Rather than words comes the thought”). For the personae of these poems, language appears as a barrier, not a bridge: words are an obstacle to handling experience. Not surprisingly, some readers interpret this as a sign of Larkin’s mistrust of language and also evidence of his

postmodernism. However, his attitude towards language is as ambivalent as his attitude to communities.

### 2.6.2. *Names, Words and the Reliability of Language*

“Maiden Name” (CP 101) is a revealing poem. The title suggests that the subject matter is a value symbol (also a linguistic unit), in which the opposite, but equally intense, meanings of losing and preserving create ambivalence. The focus of the text is on language, which is reinforced by the vocabulary of the speaker: he uses words such as “fine light sounds”, “semantically” and “phrase”.

Laurence Lerner offers a wide context for the reading of this poem:

Postmodern poetic theory often claims that the true subject of poetry is language itself, and particularly its unreliability. Larkin’s traditional, language-loving poems are a refutation of this theory, yet this poem shows that paradoxically, they are also a confirmation of it. (*Philip Larkin* 14)

The poem begins with a grim vision of the slipping of meaning:

Marrying left your maiden name disused,  
 Its five light sounds no longer meaning your face,  
 Your voice, and all your variants of grace;  
 For since you were so thankfully confused  
 By law with someone else, you cannot be  
 Semantically the same as that young beauty;  
 It was of her that these two words were used.<sup>1</sup>

In the “freshly created universe” of this poem (to use Larkin’s phrase in the “Statement”) the linguistic sign does not fulfil its function as defined by Saussure. The reader cannot help asking the question: who is the male speaker of this text in love with? The real target of his

---

<sup>1</sup> This line is probably the clearest representation of the notion of discontinuity in Larkin: the continuously existing core of the personality is an illusion, a construct in our consciousness

desire is the maiden name: it is no accident that this is the title of the poem. Erotic love itself is a verbal construct, and the subject is also shaping the target with it. The speaker, as the only authority of this discourse, interprets their relationship, and the desired woman becomes a metonymy of the linguistic sign: “you cannot be / Semantically the same”. But the implied poet is horrified by this world in which the signified and the signifier have swapped places. Therefore, in the last line of the stanza quoted above he restores the generally accepted order: it is the words that refer to an entity existing independently from them, even though this entity belongs to the past.

In stanza two the maiden name is turned into a disposable object: “Lying just where you left it”. In the next few lines it is no more than another dusty piece of memorabilia. The rhetoricity of the speaker’s voice intensifies to the degree that it becomes didactic. A power position is constructed, which enables the poet to restore the one-time love relationship in the new situation where the meaning of the maiden name no longer exists.

Following the principles of his poetics, Larkin distinguishes between the beautiful and the true: the maiden name and the reality of the marriage with another man. At this point, however, he finds a leak in his theory. His starting point was that experience is non-verbal by definition, but suffering the loss of a name he is “in love” with is a linguistic experience. What follows is the anxiety and uncertainty represented in the poem. The speaker is not sure of what is beautiful and what is true in the “universe” where he has positioned himself as authority. He asks the question: is the maiden name “untruthful”? His first answer to his own question is: “No, it means you”, but as he finds this unsatisfactory, he tries again: “It means what we feel now about you then”. This is a declaration: since it does not follow from anything in the previous lines, every word in it can be read as a rhyme. Thus, the implied poet finds himself in a void, helped only by his own definition. He still hopes to regain his sense of security by replacing the lost meaning of the words with another meaning, preferably one that he can control:

So your old name shelters our faithfulness,  
Instead of losing shape and meaning less  
With your depreciating luggage laden.

The subject’s faithfulness in the present is the transformed beauty carried by the maiden name in the past. Experience has been preserved by “transference”, since the implied poet established a firm power position within language. In Larkin’s later poetry, however, the

“autonomous individual” is not in full control of language: the speaker becomes a subject who lets language speak through him. John Goodby reads this character in the context of the social changes of Britain in the late sixties and early seventies (mainly the increasing tension between classes and the conflict in Northern Ireland), and concludes:

Larkin’s poetry shows signs of polarizing in the way he felt British society had; hence the almost frenetic brilliance of the second part of ‘Livings’, the ‘secret, bestial peace’ of ‘The Card-Players’, the sardonic ‘Lozenge of love! Medallion of art! / O wolves of memory! / Immensements!’ in ‘Sad Steps’. It is as though Larkin wishes to destabilize his language, to violate an earlier, cherished linguistic decorum, as a response to what is going on around him. (137)

When the persona of “Sad Steps” (*CP* 169) tries to describe moonlight, his ecstasy carries him further and further away from the everyday diction that Larkin and the other Movement poets are associated with. In the two lines quoted by Goodby, first he transforms moonlight into a geometrical form, second a work of visual art, third a metaphor of memory, and finally it is identified with a linguistic innovation, a non-existent lexical unit. Instead of “transferring” experience into the verbal form of a poem, he represents how hard the persona tries to articulate what cannot be articulated. He is not unlike Shelley’s speaker in “To a Skylark”, who only finds similes to represent the bird: he can tell what it is *like*, but cannot say what it *is*. Larkin’s character admits his failure: “No, // One shivers slightly”.

The linguistic polarity Goodby observes in Larkin’s poetry as a cohesive whole can also be seen within the poems. The sudden change of register in “Sad Steps”, as shown previously, is a case in point; the contrast between everyday diction and the language of contemplation is typical of all the dramatic lyrics and monologues in Larkin’s oeuvre. The chief model, once again, was Hardy: the division of the implied self is one of his methods of composition both in fiction and in poetry. This duality is spectacular in the representation of the self-conflict between his agnostic self and his interest in transcendental existence. At the end of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* he polarizes his self into two characters: Angel stands for his agnostic side, Tess for the side that still feels nostalgia for the certainty offered by religion. The same polarity can be seen in the contrast between his childhood self and the adult poet in his poem written twenty five years later, “The Oxen”. Both in Hardy and in Larkin we can witness a version of Bakhtinian polyphony and dialogicity.

The heteroglossia of the whole life work becomes clearly visible in the light of the contemporary and later reception of Larkin. In 1961 (after the publication of *The Less Deceived*, but still before *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*) George Fraser wrote:

What Larkin seems to me to be repeatedly saying in many of his best poems is that a sensible man settles for second-bests. [...]

When I think of Larkin I always think of Henry James's great short story, "The Beast in the Jungle": about a man who is so overshadowed by the sense of some nameless horror or terror that may jump on him if he takes risks with life, that he never takes any risks. When the beast does jump, it jumps, not as actual terror, but as the sudden awareness that a long life crippled by fear and caution has been wasted. (235)

Fraser's reading of Larkin's poetry up to the early 1960s is legitimate and thought-provoking (although somewhat one-sided). One should remember, however, that Larkin's characters may opt for the "second-best" and reject taking risks<sup>2</sup>, but the implied poet constructs these characters in a richly self-reflexive way. The question indeed is whether a life of isolation<sup>3</sup> is only "second best"; late poems such as "Vers de Société" make telling points about an isolated form of existence.

Nevertheless, his characters determine the diction of his poetry: as opposed to Geoffrey Hill, who treats the Scripture as the most important sign system<sup>4</sup>, Larkin uses the language of agnosticism. Its main consequence is not that God does not exist (Larkin rarely mentions this), but the unacceptable finality of death (the central topic of his poetry). John Goodby writes that personal extinction is the "ultimate otherness" and concludes that in a world where the poet is without society "the only 'elsewhere' left is death" (138). This is the "nameless horror or terror" that Fraser sees in his early poetry (including *The Less Deceived*); the persona cannot take risks, because the thought of "dying and being dead" does not let him. "Taking risks" is synonymous with choosing and, as I outlined in Chapter 2.2, according to Larkin the chance of choosing disappears with aging. His poetry suggests that self-deception as a strategy of fighting against this condition is a part of human life by definition; the best we can do is to be aware of its techniques. (It will be remembered that the title of his first major volume is *The Less Deceived*, not *The Non-deceived*.) In an early but systematic study,

<sup>2</sup> In this feature, Larkin is frequently contrasted with Thom Gunn.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted with special emphasis that this statement is about the characters in the poem, not the actual Larkin. This is relevant even when we read the most personal poems.

<sup>4</sup> Hill and religious poetry both serve here as examples.

published still before *High Windows*, Lolette Kuby writes that there are two main types of self-deception represented in Larkin's poetry: illusion and rationalization (89). Hugh Underhill mentions two other techniques: "For Larkin, beatitude and nostalgia are, equally, versions of that seductive 'appropriate falsehood' ('For Sidney Bechet') with which each of us tries to avoid confrontation with a universe made absurd by the unavailability of death and the death of God" (185).

### 2.6.3. Asking Questions about Human Life

The question, then, is: why live? Is there another existence behind the material reality of living and dying? One of Larkin's central dilemmas is his attitude towards transcendence. Seamus Heaney writes:

[W]hile Larkin is exemplary in the way he sifts the conditions of contemporary life, refuses alibis and pushes consciousness towards an exposed condition that is neither cynicism nor despair, there survives in him a repining for a more crystalline reality to which he might give allegiance. ("The Main of Light" 24)

This kind of "on the one hand—on the other hand" argumentation is frequent in Larkin criticism, and signifies the dilemma of the agnostic poet at least at three levels: on an ontological level this is the controversy of materialism and a transcendental view of the world; on an aesthetic level, the inner antagonism of a romantic and a Movement poet; and on the level of tradition, it is manifest in the "rivalry" of Yeats and Hardy in Larkin's poetry. The implied poet is in search of answers to the basic questions of existence, but he can only do this by polarizing his *Weltanschauung* and constructing binary oppositions.

Larkin's poetry is not the literature of committed materialism, let alone atheism. Different critics place him differently on the scale between religious and anti-religious attitudes; James Booth, for example, writes: "Although he is a materialist Larkin cannot accept the extremist atheist contention that death is irrelevant to life" (*The Poet's Plight* 197). On one level Larkin, no doubt, shows numerous signs of materialism: the down-to-earth subject matters, the almost irritating emphasis on the limits of everyday existence, the predominance of dark colours in his imagery, the multitude of privative modifiers in his morphology, and so on. But the opposite vector of force is an equally significant component

in Larkin's axiom of preserving values, even though he is fully aware of its self-deceptive tendency. As A. T. Tolley writes:

The gestures of preservation are gestures of transcendence; and, in their recognition of our longing to hold on to the loveliness of the past and find in our love for it something that will render it permanent, they seem to make their own beauty and consolation. (*My Proper Ground* 184)

Although not a religious person<sup>5</sup> in a number of his poems Larkin constructs the attitude of searching for an autonomous, non-institutional religion. In "Church Going" the speaker willy-nilly acknowledges that in spite of being a non-believer he is attracted by churches (that is, misses something they offer); "Here" ends with an image of "unfenced existence" (implying continuation beyond material existence); "Water" plays with the possibility of founding a new religion; according to "An Arundel Tomb" the survival of love is "almost true"; in Terry Whalen's disputable (but thought-provoking) suggestion "The Explosion" is a major religious poem (59). Nowhere does he show any inclination *to accept* religion, but his poetry represents the search for hope of a disillusioned and agnostic person.

This makes a common denominator for him and the eight other members of the Movement, and this also makes Larkin the central figure of a generation, with all the controversies I mentioned in Chapter 2.3. Andrew Swarbrick calls attention to Larkin's ambivalent attitude:

Larkin's suspicion of theory and his distaste for academic erudition in poetry meant that he could never quite be 'in' the Movement, even as in the popular imagination he became its embodiment. Quite simply, he regarded many of its poets as his rivals and did not want his own developing reputation to be too closely associated with any 'school' or 'group'. Perhaps he sensed, too, that the Movement was quick to fall prey to its own internal contradictions. (88-89)

This controversial relationship is also manifest in the poems. What I previously defined as the duality of a materialist self and another self searching for transcendence is projected in the aesthetic antagonism of a "Movement poet" and a "romantic poet". On the one hand, he

---

<sup>5</sup> Neither was his father; therefore, he did not receive religious education in the family.

claims that experience within the material world is everything; on the other, he wants to break out of everyday routine.

The influence of Yeats was fundamentally important at the beginning of his career; both critics and Larkin (in retrospect) read the poems of *The North Ship* as imitations of Yeats.<sup>6</sup> It is a commonplace in Larkin criticism that the key turning point came as a result of his profound understanding of Hardy's poetry. After his attraction to Yeats's transcendental world, in Hardy he found a poet who based his poetry on immediate, material experience and everyday existence. (Of course, this general remark should be qualified with a reference to the supernatural imagery in Hardy, which I mentioned in Chapter 2.4. But, as I also mentioned there, he never writes about a mystical union with the supernatural.) As a general tendency, we are justified in claiming that the real master of the mature Larkin was Hardy, rather than Yeats, but one should add: Yeats's influence never disappeared. Larkin's Hardyesque materialism and metonymic diction are matched by elements of Yeatsian symbolism. Motion discerns it in "Dockery and Son" (*Philip Larkin*. Contemporary Writers ser. 14), Heaney in "Aubade" (*The Redress of Poetry* 163).

In choosing his masters Larkin reveals the same inner struggle as he does in his imagery and his ambivalent attitude towards the Movement. His self is also polarized in his very different attractions to the "transcendental" Yeats and the "empirical" Hardy. As I demonstrated previously, such a split of the self can also be seen in Hardy's poetry and fiction. Therefore, his influence on Larkin can be observed not only as one side of an inner conflict, but in the very existence of this conflict, too.

Larkin was sharply critical of J. O. Bailey's monograph on Hardy, because its author claims that "*The Dynasts* is 'the contribution of a poet-philosopher to a hopeful and even religious view of the world'" (FR 176). Ironically, this misreading is repeated from time to time in Larkin criticism, particularly in the discussion of "Church Going". R. N. Parkinson offers the most committed, and detailed, religious reading. According to him, the title of the poem has three possible meanings: 1. "a regular and devout attendance at the services, together with support of the church's mission and function"; 2. "the mere good manners of well-meaning habit which at once keep the church going and prevent it from going altogether"; 3. "the casual, bored dropping-in on buildings". The vision of the poem is constructed through the interplay of these meanings (225).

---

<sup>6</sup> For two significant attempts at challenging this opinion see Victoria Longino's "The Alien Moment: Philip Larkin and Gender" and Stephen Cooper's "The Journey North" in *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer* (86-106).



The starting point of Parkinson's otherwise thoroughgoing analysis seems tendentious. The second possible meaning he mentions merges two different connotations, and blurs the latent meaning that makes this title a Larkinesque pun: 'church (as an institution) going (away, that is leaving, disappearing from our modern life)'—grammatically: subject + present participle. (This kind of pun based upon the formal identity of the gerund and the present participle can also be noticed in the title of "Faith Healing".) This implies more scepticism and less respect for the church as suggested by those critics who read this text as a religious poem (apart from Parkinson, J. R. Watson, Eduard Vlad and, to a certain extent, Richard Palmer can be mentioned). The danger is that by sticking to one possible meaning (which, no doubt, is a part of the text) and excluding all other possibilities one will hide the tension between the variety of latent interpretations, although that is as important here as in most of Larkin's major poems.<sup>7</sup>

J. R. Watson reads the text with Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*. In his words, "[t]he reason why this is such an important poem is that it involves, clearly and unequivocally, the confrontation between the profane and the sacred" (354). He concludes: "[O]ne of Larkin's greatest strengths as a poet is his position as *homo religiosus*, with an intuitive awareness of the tenuous sacred in the midst of the profane" (360).

In Parkinson's view, it is not by accident that the line "Power of some sort or other will go on" is in the geometrical centre of the poem. The phrase "of some sort" suggests "that vigour and activity will continue, like life itself, though the source of that vigour may still be unknown to us..." (227). He derives the seemingly pejorative phrase "ruin-bibber" from a compound noun referring to Jesus in the King James Bible (228). In his reading even the adjective "ghostly" in stanza 6 "means spiritual and holy" (228). In analyzing the last stanza he draws the conclusion:

If we can no longer admit meaning to the name of God we still acknowledge the gods of our own compulsions. The poet recognizes that the Christian church had long since come to grips with these compulsions in its own way; that it had first dethroned them and finally found places for them within its own hierarchies. (229)

---

<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, further connotations of the phrase and possible subtexts could be mentioned. Donald Davie, for example, in *Purity of Diction in English Verse* quotes Wordsworth's critical comment on Cowper's metaphor "the church-going bell" (17), in which the strange epithet carries still further meanings.

Parkinson, therefore, finds “Church Going” similar to Eliot’s religious poetry, particularly “Whispers of Immortality”, and adds that R. S. Thomas’s “In Church” is more disillusioned, although Thomas is generally regarded as a typically Christian poet (230-231). He discovers the same kind of faith in Larkin as one finds in Browning’s speaker in “Bishop Blougram’s Apology”: “with me, faith means perpetual unbelief / Kept quiet” (233).

Eduard Vlad has gone even farther than the other two critics by finding this poem “indicative of Larkin’s wish ‘to be deceived’ or to deceive himself, to give in to idealistic, even mythopoeic, temptations” (28).

As opposed to the previously mentioned readings, some other critics, such as John Press and James Booth, have found Larkin’s atheism made clear in “Church Going” (Press 255, Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer* 135). John Osborne suggests that the poem is “resolutely secular, setting cogitative Yeats against transcendental Yeats” (*Larkin, Ideology* 96).

A close reading of the poem makes it clear that it follows the characteristic pattern of dramatic lyrics as outlined in Chapter 2.4: the speaker of the first two stanzas takes a walk in the church and lets this experience take control of him (with his passivity making it sure that it remains intact). In the third stanza and later the cognitive self comes to the fore.

The figure represented at the beginning of the poem is an awkward, clumsy tourist, who encounters the experience of observing the church by accident. These stanzas suggest inhibition and uncertainty in every line: the gate turns out to be too noisy and the phrase “another church” comes from someone who is tired of sightseeing. The comic character utters God’s name in church unconsciously, and he is just as unconscious when he takes off his cycle-clips to show his respect. The comic events follow in the same manner to the end of stanza 2, where the speaker concludes: “the place was not worth stopping for”. The poem starts as a travesty of church elegies.

The turning point is at the beginning of stanza 3. The sentence “Yet stop I did” is still comic with its overtly bombastic style, but it also starts the profound cognition of the experience. The middle part of the poem mainly consists of visions in which the future visitors of the church appear: superstitious women, archaeologists and “bored” tourists.<sup>8</sup> One of these is his own future self, who will again awkwardly wander about the building, not unlike the persona in the first two stanzas; nevertheless, in the fiction projected into the future he will find this the only place where birth, marriage and death form a unity.

---

<sup>8</sup> This part of the poem shows the influence of the chapter in George Orwell’s *1984* which describes a disused church.

At this point, the speaker of the first two stanzas and his double re-constructed in the future become identical. The basis of the unity is the identity of the experience, which represents the only certainty in contrast with the uncertainty of contemplation. This is why, as Nicholas Marsh writes, this poem “is an unresolved tangle. The different attitudes towards both belief and disbelief that Larkin has built into the poem in layers of self-deception, equivocation, ambivalence and irony cancel each other out” (118).

The most obvious conflict is between the complex question implied in the whole poem and the attempt to give an answer in the last line of the poem. The speaker is aware of the vulnerability of his point, as is suggested by the ambiguous “if only” opening of the last line (instead of “because”, “for”, or “since”, which would probably sound more appropriate in this context). This forms stylistic harmony with the previous question marks, the privative modifiers (unignorable, hatless, disbelief, uninformed), and the blasphemous phrases (ruin-bibber, frowsty barn). Consequently, Christian belief cannot be triumphant: the only certainty is to be found in everyday existence, the implied poet is agnostic and conservative in his effort to preserve values. He does not believe in God, but he feels the superhuman power of Fate and the certainty transmitted from the past. Transferring it to the reader is what he wants, and this creates an illusion of continuity. He makes his character do it, but he observes him with irony, which becomes complete in the last line: the value of the church is carried by the dead bodies buried in the churchyard. The poet cannot *not* write about death.

V. Penelope Pelizzon’s reading of Larkin’s obsession with extinction is illuminating:

Paradoxically, in the process of writing a poem about death, Larkin could forget for a time about dying *per se* and focus instead on the creative act. Thus, each time he erected a lyric ‘I’, then set the persona on the path to the inevitable, and in the process authored a new work, Larkin paralleled the carnivalesque murder of a mock-king in ritual sacrifice to ensure rebirth. (222)

Although (as I pointed out in Chapter 2.1.) I cannot observe carnivalesque laughter in the poems, I agree with Pelizzon about the emphasis on the creative act: the only chance Larkin’s personae find in struggling with the thought of death is by writing a poem. It is only by talking about death that the speakers can create moments of transcendence; this way, writing is also replacement for religion. What they cannot find in church is constructed in the act of writing the poem.

It follows from this logic that images of nothingness are so frequent in Larkin (“Here”, “Absences”, “Water”, “High Windows”, etc.). Hugh Underhill writes that they are often read as signs of Larkin’s desire to move out of ordinary life, but he thinks differently: “The poems seem to me *terrified* by that brink to which they come, that endlessness they momentarily perceive, and to want instantly to withdraw from it” (188). In my reading, yearning and terror are simultaneously and ambivalently there; the tension between the two is a very rich source of meanings in Larkin, as I previously showed in “Wants”. Raphaël Ingelbien sees this feature in the context of symbolist poetry:

In his moments of failed or negative transcendence, Larkin subverted the symbolism that Eliot had put in the service of religious patriotism, and was left with visions of absence which are perhaps the nearest English equivalent to the first symbolists’ fascination with nothingness. (142)

Both terrified and attracted, Larkin’s personae never say no to the possibility that transcendence can be found in absences<sup>9</sup>. But they are also aware that choosing nothingness as an absolute value would be choosing death, which would also mean the end of poetry. Stan Smith draws this conclusion at the end of a study: “Clearly, for the later Larkin [after 1952] the reluctantly social poet, *elsewhere* as a social fiction *underwrites* rather than undermines *here*, *something* is better than *nothing*, and *someone* than *no one*. For once then, something” (274, emphasis in the original).

Not surprisingly, an enigmatic life work is open to such different (sometimes controversial) readings as those quoted previously. Larkin knew that the non-verbal experience *par excellence* was the personal extinction of the subject and also that it means an epistemological end, in which literature does not exist. To quote Smith once again, this is why he struggled to find *something*, and this is why one of his central subject matters was time, in which this something can be grasped.

---

<sup>9</sup> James Booth distinguishes between two kinds of absence in Larkin: the simple “escape from the pressures and unsatisfactoriness of life” and a richer, metaphysically suggestive meaning of the word (*Philip Larkin: Writer* 160-162). In this chapter I only focus on the latter.

### **3. Writing about Time**

### 3.1. Time as Prison and the Chances of Escape

Craig Raine concludes an essay on Larkin's poetry with a brief evaluation of the opening poem in *High Windows*, "To the Sea":

The first line—'To step over the low wall that divides'—tells us a great deal. It is a low wall but it also *seems* low now that Larkin has grown up. He once described childhood as a 'forgotten boredom' but here it is vivid and welcome. A species of time-travel has been accomplished. An ordinary miracle. (78)

Moving backwards and forwards from the present, this way creating an illusion of continuity, is one aspect of time in Larkin, and apparently this is what Raine appreciates as a "miraculous" achievement in his poetry. However, as I indicated in Chapter 2.2, Larkin's poetry suggests that human beings are unable to develop a direct sense of time; one of his strategies to represent temporal existence is constructing images of time units.

#### 3.1.1. Metaphors of Time

Raine describes images of time in Larkin with the metaphor of time-travel. Apart from discussing "To the Sea", he convincingly points out that in "Reference Back" the speaker remembers something that he constructs in his imagination (65-67). However, this is only one aspect of Larkin's sense of time. Raine does not mention the poem that is most obviously about the act of remembering ("I Remember, I Remember"), and only briefly refers to the phrase "forgotten boredom" (Larkin, *CP* 33) in "Coming", treating it as an artistic failure. As a result, he constructs a reading of Larkin as a poet of the continuity of time, turning a blind eye to those texts that suggest a completely different notion: the impossibility of sensing and representing this continuity, implying that remembering is either self-deceptive or disillusioning. He is also sharply critical of some phrases in "An Arundel Tomb": "The 'lengths and breadths | Of time' is a strikingly empty phrase [and] I really don't know how to interpret 'the hollow of an unarmorial age'" (72).

More significantly, he ignores the other aspect of time so powerfully represented by Larkin: its divisibility. Time is continuous, but it can be split up into units. In "Days" Larkin contrasts these two aspects. When he asks the question "Where can we live but days?" (*CP*

67), and answers with an image of continuity (the priest and the doctor running in an infinite universe) he suggests: we may think that units of time are the only aspect of sensing temporal existence, but there is another side to it, beyond our reach. In our everyday life, we can imagine time only if we use metaphors of space to describe it. This is why he uses so many tropes transforming temporality into spatial relations, such as the images criticized by Raine, or in “Afternoons”: “In the hollows of the afternoon / Young mothers assemble” (CP 121). The past embraces the recreation ground depicted in the poem, and the women can find shelter only in the hollows that belong both to time and space. When at the beginning of the next stanza we read “Behind them, at intervals, / Stand husbands in skilled trade” (CP 121), we are already aware that the word “behind” refers both to space and time (the former confirmed by the image of the home waiting for them, the latter by the wedding album, something that recalls the past). Of course, a metaphorical meaning (suggesting support) is also a part of the image.

In other words: time-travel is no doubt a central component of Larkin’s poems, but so is the image of time units, which are given autonomy in tropes of space. This is why the lengths and breadths and hollows make sense: they are parts of the struggle of an agnostic man to understand the world. The seemingly awkward phrases are meant to seem awkward and represent a universal search for the meaning of time. Ironically, notions of time transformed into space can best be seen in those poems that use a metaphor of travelling: the texts about train journeys (“Here”, “The Whitsun Weddings”, “I Remember, I Remember”, “Dockery and Son”). I will enlarge on these in Chapter 3.3; in this chapter I will focus on how Larkin constructs images of time units.

The brief poem “Days” (CP 67) is almost in the geometrical centre of *The Whitsun Weddings* and this can be taken as symbolic, since it can be read as a key text demonstrating Larkin’s experience of time. In it, he recreates the notion of time as destroyer, and while pretending to be simple-minded he picks up the line of a long tradition, originating from the Renaissance (see Panofsky 469). What seems to be time-structuring in the first stanza turns out to be the absurd antecedent of extinction in the second. Larkin represents this conflict by contrasting two different voices in the poem.

I discussed in Chapter 2.4 how constructing masks became a central method of writing in Larkin, and quoted Laurence Lerner’s paradoxical remark: in such poems “Larkin is acting the role of being Larkin”. Lerner explains: “This is exactly what is meant by persona: choosing from one’s actual behaviour details that draw amused attention to the kind of person he is” (*Philip Larkin* 40). This suggestion puts the emphasis on selection as an essential factor

of constructing a speaker (or persona) in a poem. However, if we put it to the test of reading “Days”, Lerner’s definition does not seem to be sufficient.

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker blithely observes that days “are to be happy in” and asks, “Where can we live but days?” This speaker is not constructed merely out of elements in the implied poet’s (or the actual poet’s) behaviour. In fact, the childish naïve tone suggests the opposite of the implied poet. In poignant contrast with Larkin’s agnosticism, this speaker confesses unconditioned belief in the order of the world (apparently the best of all worlds), signified by the happiness brought by days. In this stanza the poet is wearing the mask of his opposite, perhaps somebody he would like to become, consciously or unconsciously. Rather than simply selecting certain features of his subjectivity, Larkin polarizes his own consciousness (including his notion of the desired other) in a Hardiesque manner. The co-existence of two agents belonging to the same subject forms the tension that the aesthetics of this poem rests on. The structural consequence is that in the two stanzas the poet uses two different voices.

The first agent is the speaker whose voice we hear in stanza one: a person captured by the routine of everyday existence, and also somebody who wants naïve but reassuring responses to his childish questions. (It should be noticed that the questions and the answers in this stanza come from the same speaker.) The naïve tone is genuine from the speaker’s point of view, but it touches upon a fundamental problem of philosophy: the interpretation of time. The controversy represented in this poem is basically the same as that carried by “the artful tensions of the calendar” in “Wants” (see Chapter 2.6). This is the paradox of the continuity and divisibility of time. The speaker of the first stanza in “Days” regards the act of splitting up time into days as natural (not “artful”, as the speaker of “Wants”). “Where can we live but days?”, he or she asks in the last line of the stanza, the rhetorical question meaning: could it be imagined in any different way? In other words, can we form a notion of life without forming a concept of days? The implied answer, of course, is “no”. We cannot perceive human life if we do not see units of time.

The speaker of the second stanza is a different agent. (This shift from one agent to another is a typical feature of Larkin’s dramatic lyrics as outlined in Chapter 2.4.) The first word of the stanza (“ah”) suggests an epiphany, a moment of sudden understanding:

Ah, solving that question  
Brings the priest and the doctor  
In their long coats



## Running over the fields.

The second stanza comes as an answer to the first one, and it is surprising at least for three reasons. First: it replies to a question that was meant to be merely rhetorical by the speaker of the first stanza, a statement disguised as a question. The very act of giving an answer is unexpected. Second: the naïve but abstract language of the first stanza is followed by a poetic vision; the nature of the diction changes significantly. Third: at first sight, this image of the priest and the doctor, “running over the fields” has nothing to do with the question, even if we understand it as a real question.

The image has been read as signifying suicide (Kuby 88), but I cannot find any element in the poem that would suggest suicide rather than death in general: the black-and-white image (the priest wearing a black robe, the doctor a white coat) implies that the two figures are running to a dying person. The image is very sharp, exact and accurate in the way William Blake conceived of poetic visions. As opposed to the tentative or uncertain conclusions of some other poems (“Reasons for Attendance”, “Church Going”, “Mr Bleaney”) this vision is constructed as the only possible and acceptable answer. Larkin suddenly changes the perspective: the notion of death makes the question of the first stanza meaningless. The first speaker asks whether we human beings live in units of time. In the second speaker’s suggestion, however, there are no units of time in death; therefore, viewed from the perspective of personal extinction, the contrast between the two aspects of time (continuity and divisibility) is irrelevant. Larkin’s days are not like Ralph Waldo Emerson’s days in his poem with the same title. Since their existence as units of time is the construct of a childish mind, Emerson’s *carpe diem* idea is illusory. Larkin’s poem can be read as a bitter parody of the American transcendentalist’s text (the same way as “Church Going” can be read as a parody of Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, or “I Remember, I Remember” as a parody of Thomas Hood’s poem with the same title).

To paraphrase the question of the poem: what do days mean? In Larkin’s poem they are units of time whose final goal is to be annihilated. The end of days is death. We must understand this if we do not want to be fully deceived, but this comprehension will not make death either knowable or acceptable. Larkin can only offer a negative definition of death. This poem shows what death is *not*: it is not a series of days. If we see this, we are sadder and wiser, but also more alienated from our own death. The agnostic poet dramatizes his dilemma of understanding time, on the one hand, and his mortality, on the other. The two, of course, cannot be distinguished. In Chapter 2.2 I quoted Paul de Man: “the relationship between the

self and time is necessarily mediated by death: it is the experience of mortality that awakens within us a consciousness of time that is more than merely natural” (*Romanticism* 93). This implies that time can be understood from the perspective of death, as it is manifest in the imagery of “Days”. Representing units of time versus the indivisibility of time in death signifies an epistemology that largely determines Larkin’s poetics.

This contrast between the two aspects of time had already been a recurrent theme in Larkin’s texts when he wrote this poem. Apart from “Wants” in *The Less Deceived*, we can discern it in *A Girl in Winter* and in an early poem of *The North Ship*, too. The heroine of *A Girl in Winter* reveals the same philosophy as I have discussed in “Days”. When Katherine thinks of her flat, the novel describes it in this passage of free indirect speech: “Like all other places, it was both temporal and eternal, and she found that degrees of temporality did not interest her—while in eternity, of course, there were no such measurements” (140). The text I am referring to from *The North Ship* is “The bottle is drunk out by one”, a poem that shows the same structure as “Days”: the first stanza represents the divisibility of time and the second its continuity.

“Days”, however, is different from its antecedents inasmuch as it is more disillusioned. The basis of disillusionment in this poem is that Larkin uses a limited point of view: the two speakers represent two isolated positions. The first speaker is naïve and follows the clichés of abstract categories (mainly the cliché of building up your time from day to day, the idea of *Bildung*, in the form of this grim parody of catechism); the second is sane and thinks in terms of imagery. The first disguises a statement as a question; the second hides his/her questions behind the statement of a vision. These two together construct a notion of the poet’s mind; more precisely, they capture a moment of his subjectivity. What is tragic about this moment is that it does not show that characteristic human structuring of time which the psychologist Eric Berne discusses as a major component of life (15-19). The first speaker in the poem accepts ready-made structuring instead of doing it him/herself; the second one cannot structure time, because his mind is dominated by his vision of death. In my reading, this is also typical of Larkin’s mature verse in general. His protagonists do not structure time; they only split it up into units. This makes the notion of time as an enemy (even the arch-enemy) of human beings clearer. A number of his major poems represent this experience, but nowhere else does it lead to such a failure of the subject as in this poem. Therefore, “Days” is not only a key poem in Larkin’s life work, but also a text in which he stretches his notion of life and death, taking his ontological and epistemological convictions to the extreme. This is why it is more puzzling to read this poem than the other major texts. Simple diction is

contrasted with a “composite and complex experience” (to quote the “Statement”), an experience that we will share with the priest and the doctor if we want to be less deceived.

For us who live in history the only direct contact with time is our perception of the present, and I mean *perception* rather than *cognition*. This is why the poem contrasts a perceptive agent in the first stanza with a cognitive agent in the second one, following the pattern of dramatic lyrics. Or, to put it another way, the speaker of the opening lines is contrasted with the implied poet manifest in the closure. What the poem suggests is that the gap between seeing the present moment and understanding time follows from human nature. This chasm between perception and cognition can be bridged only in the rare moments of epiphany.

The ideology constructed in the poem (and also in the whole of the life work) shows similarity with Albert Camus’s existentialism. Both Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and Larkin suggest that it is the consciousness of human life that transforms the challenge of death into the principle of life (Camus 62).

### 3.1.2. *Time as the Moment in History*

The poem that follows “Days” in *The Whitsun Weddings* is “MCMXIV” (CP 127-28), in which we see exactly how people perceive the present moment in history, while they are unaware of the future (symbolically speaking: time itself). The four stanzas of this text contain one long sentence only, without any verbal predicate, indicating a condition of illusory timelessness. The imagery represents the last moment of peace between two wars: the short period between the end of the Boer War (1902) and the outbreak of the First World War (1914), when the English middle class experienced triumph, calmness and liberation from the constraints of rigid Victorian morality. In the poetry of the Edwardian era idylls of private life and the notion of social innocence predominated. This is echoed in Larkin’s poem, with the conclusion drawn in the last stanza:

Never such innocence,  
 Never before or since,  
 As changed itself to past  
 Without a ward – the men  
 Leaving the gardens tidy,

The thousands of marriages  
 Lasting a little while longer:  
 Never such innocence again.

The Roman numerals in the title create an image of something carved in stone, like on a plaque, a façade or a tombstone. This is the way the present feeling is carried into the future: line 3 reveals how innocence can be saved like an old photograph. As the moment passes, it is immediately closed into the past represented by that particular day. The poem is still not simply a repetition of Larkin's manifestation of preserving experience. The line "Never before or since" warns the reader that the situation recreated in the poem is not something eternal: on the contrary, it is a rare historical moment. The style, similarly to "Days", evokes a black-and-white photograph (or perhaps some seconds of a silent film): Larkin uses no reference or allusion to any colour or sound. Only the sight of the historical moment exists in the "universe" of the poem: the image becomes a snapshot of the past without any word uttered, without any verbal comment made within the picture. Stanza two reads as the description of a series of photographs:

And the shut shops, the bleached  
 Established names on the sunblinds,  
 The farthings and sovereigns,  
 And dark-clothed children at play  
 Called after kings and queens,  
 The tin advertisements  
 For cocoa and twist, and the pubs  
 Wide open all day;

The charm of the poem is created by the tension between the comic effects that we usually associate with photos and films from the period depicted and the shadow of the forthcoming cataclysm. Work is not done (cf. the opposite in "Aubade" and the two "Toads" poems): the pubs are open, but the shops are shut. Life has stopped and been transferred into a picture. The naming of children suggests an illusion of continuity, and this line echoes the bleaching of "established names" at the beginning of the stanza. The children wear dark clothes as if mourning their own future, whereas the gradual deterioration of the shopkeepers' billboards

implies the dropping of their names. Each of them is made into an “anonymous entity”, not unlike Lucy is made by death in Wordsworth’s poems (de Man, *Romanticism* 86).

The characters are mute, and this inability to speak anticipates the loss of innocence. In David Timms’s reading, the poem’s effect lies in the tension between what is overtly said and the understatement. We, the readers of the poem a century later, are aware of what the men in the picture will learn only during the years to come: the cataclysm caused by the First World War. We are moved by the simultaneous comprehension of the self-deception we perceive in those men and the reality we know about (113). For all appearances, “MCMXIV” is not a nostalgic poem: apart from its attempt at “preserving experience”, it also speaks about its impossibility (as the repeated phrase “Never... again” signifies). Preserving turns out to be a construction: although the speaker pretends to transfer the intact, non-verbal experience into the poem, he can only do so by also creating a tension as a side-effect. Therefore, the tension is not only between the innocence in the picture and the knowledge today (a more deceived and a less deceived position) but also between the desire of the implied poet to preserve experience and its ultimate impossibility. The ideal of “creative photography” prevails, but the photographer cannot leave the subject of the picture unchanged.

“MCMXIV” can also be seen as the historical background against which we can read another poem in *The Whitsun Weddings*, “Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses” (CP 134), an ironic dramatic monologue in which the notion of days returns in the image of a national holiday stopping time for the sake of remembering and paying respect. Its speaker is a stock character well known from comic campus novels: a “suitcase professor”. The sentence in the title is expected by many academic tourists, since it comes as a reassuring answer to an unasked question: yes, of course, we will bear all your expenses. The speaker of the poem starts his monologue with the confidence and arrogance that he develops on the basis of the financial security and academic prestige that the title suggests. The poem recalls a long tradition from 18<sup>th</sup>-century satires (such as Robert Burns’s “Holy Willie’s Prayer”) through 19<sup>th</sup>-century dramatic monologues and 20<sup>th</sup>-century campus novels:

Hurrying to catch my Comet  
 One dark November day,  
 Which soon would snatch me from it  
 To the sunshine of Bombay,  
 I pondered pages Berkeley  
 Not three weeks since had heard,

Perceiving Chatto darkly

Through the mirror of the Third.

The protagonist wants the sunshine of the Orient instead of a November day in Europe. His costs are covered, and he does not have to do much for this trip, since he re-uses the same paper that he gave in Berkeley, California, three weeks earlier and will give on the BBC shortly. This is quite common practice in the world of academia, yet the speaker is made ridiculous by the incongruence between the scholar (who takes himself very seriously) and the childish interlocking rhymes. Echoes of childhood (always separated from the adult person's present) are significant in the structure of Larkin's poems, even where it is not overtly referred to. In "Days" we have seen the relevance of a childishly naïve character; here, the trimetric rhythm and the rhyme scheme recall nursery rhymes. However, instead of providing the mental energy for the adult speaker, infantile gestures surfacing from the unconscious hinder the full initiation into society, or at least make the persona blind to reality. The notion of this inability to see is further increased by the biblical allusion in the last two lines: the speaker *perceives* something "in a mirror darkly" (1 Corinthians 13: 12). What he sees obscurely is a publisher (hopefully looking after his text), and what he looks through is a radio programme. In the hidden synaesthesia of the last two lines the limitations of the persona surface: his perception by listening does not lead to seeing "face to face" (to quote the same passage from the New Testament).

The setting in the first stanza could be any country where November days are dull. It is stanza two that identifies the place as England with a reference to an important element of national tradition:

Crowds, colourless and careworn,  
 Had made my taxi late,  
 Yet not till I was airborne  
 Did I recall the date –  
 That day when Queen and Minister  
 And Band of Guards and all  
 Still act their solemn-sinister  
 Wreath-rubbish in Whitehall.

The professor despises the crowd and the celebration on Armistice Day: he emphasizes that he did not remember the date, and sees the wreaths on the tombs as rubbish. In his first monograph on Larkin, James Booth distinguishes between two kinds of interpretation of this poem: reading it as a left-wing satire (if we identify the speaker as the representative of the author) and reading it as an ironic dramatic monologue mocking the speaker. This latter reading can be found in several critics: John Wain, J. R. Watson, Simon Petch and Terry Whalen (Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer* 94-95). This is Watson's summary:

At least part of the irritation voiced by the speaker in 'Naturally the Foundation' is due to the fact that the crowds have not become emancipated and demysticized as he has. They still find it necessary to go to the same annual rite; he finds their superstition infuriating, particularly as it makes his taxi late. Yet as a representative of modern nonreligious man he is so disagreeable, complacent and self-satisfied, that it is clear where the poet's sympathies lie. (351)

Watson adds that whereas the speaker expects England to "grow up" in the last stanza, the way he uses language reveals his own infantilism. This could mean that Larkin is ironic about somebody who attacks a boring and obsolete form of patriotism, and one could draw the conclusion: Larkin speaks for *this* kind of patriotism by making ridiculous a character who is against it. In a broader cultural context: he also defends the literariness of such celebrations, since they are closely linked with the poetry of the First World War.

Booth, on the other hand, suggests that the relationship of the implied author and the speaker in the poem is not so obvious. He finds it more plausible that the figure constructed with a satirical edge in the first stanza becomes a spokesman of the poet in stanza two. He writes:

Larkin's creative imagination has transcended his mildly satirical intentions, and the exhilaration of his persona has hijacked the poem. Or, in Freudian terms, a slippery imaginative irony has cheated the poet's repressive superego (a responsible Tory librarian), and allowed the voice of his id (an anarchic free spirit) to be heard through the superego's show of moral satire. (*Philip Larkin: Writer* 96-97)

Larkin's comments on this topic do not fully support this reading. Booth quotes an interview, in which Larkin says: "Why he [the professor in the poem] should be blamed for not

sympathizing with the crowds on Armistice Day, I don't quite know" (*Philip Larkin: Writer* 96). But in a letter (importantly, written on 11 November 1984) he writes: "Watched the Cenotaph ceremony as usual, that day when Queen and minister etc. Very moving" (*SL* 723)<sup>1</sup>. There is no irony in the tone: he does find it moving, and refers to "Naturally the Foundation".

Booth also suggests that instead of using the method of the Browning monologue and creating "the voice of an ironic persona", Larkin writes "like Yeats, in the voice of his 'mask' or opposite" (*Philip Larkin: Writer* 97). However, if we compare the poem with 20<sup>th</sup>-century mask lyrics, such as Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" or Eliot's "Prufrock", the differences are striking. Larkin's poem does not show either the symbolism or the epiphany of the other two. Instead of constructing a metaphoric "universe", it simulates everyday existence. The character constructed in the poem cannot reach cognition (as other personae do in Larkin's dramatic lyrics), since he sees only "in a mirror darkly". Furthermore, the satirical edge of the poem is used against the snobbery of the speaker, which becomes obvious in the last stanza:

It used to make me throw up,  
 These mawkish nursery games:  
 O when will England grow up?  
     – But I outsoar the Thames,  
 And dwindle off down Auster  
     To greet Professor Lal  
 (He once met Morgan Forster),  
     My contact and my pal.

The penultimate line is revealing: the speaker mentions E. M. Forster in an informal way, using his Christian name. This is a satire of those people Larkin also mentions with sharp irony in the "Statement": "the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people" (*RW* 79).

The poem is a text recalling the tradition of the satirical dramatic monologue and the style of Burns and Jonathan Swift. The speaker reveals his pettiness gradually: instead of becoming the mask of the author, as Booth suggests, the difference between author and

---

<sup>1</sup> Of course, the meaning we construct can be the opposite of the author's self-reading. The reason why I quote Larkin's letter is not to use authorial intention as a source of interpretation. In this study I read Larkin's life work as a cohesive whole, including his letters. What I intend to point out is that Larkin's texts read each other. However, I also make an attempt to provide evidence that my reading makes sense independently from the letter, too.



character becomes more and more obvious. He betrays his snobbery in the same way as Browning's Duke in the closure of "My Last Duchess". This is why I would not interpret this character as the *other* representing the implied poet's desire for freedom.

"Naturally the Foundation" uses the image of a day and reflects on the aftermath of the idyllic still life in "MCMXIV". The two poems read each other: the latter poem's future is the former one's past. What is waiting for the men in the Great War is the root of the tradition the travelling professor despises. This adds a further dimension to the bitter irony of his character: although he enjoys the benefit of his knowledge about the First World War, he is blind to the culture that was constructed in its wake. By taking an airplane he deceives himself: he has the illusion of being out of historical time, but the result of his departure is that he loses contact with history. What he leaves behind is closed into the image of a particular day.

### 3.1.3. *The Figure of the Academic Revisited*

The same situation returns in *High Windows*. "Posterity" (CP 170) starts with an image of Larkin "acting the role of being Larkin". This "Larkin", a character in his own text, introduces the speaker in the rest of the poem:

Jake Balokowsky, my biographer,  
Has this page microfilmed. Sitting inside  
His air-conditioned cell at Kennedy  
In jeans and sneakers, he's no call to hide  
Some slight impatience with his destiny:

After this introduction the poem turns into a classic dramatic monologue: the situation simulates reality, and a fictitious speaker addresses a fictitious listener. The protagonist, again, is a travelling university lecturer, a comic figure (like Morris Zapp in David Lodge's *Changing Places* or Mortimer Cropper in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*). Balokowsky becomes a *metonymy* of all Larkin scholars, but (unlike the speaker of "Naturally the Foundation") also the *other* subject from the implied poet's point of view. As John Wain writes, he is "a perfectly decent man who happens to come from a culture totally removed in time and space from the poet's own" (363). His American nationality is also metonymical of all non-English critics: he is the scholar reading Larkin in a different culture. He is about to move to Tel Aviv;

he is probably a Jew, and his name suggests Polish roots. A typically cosmopolitan figure is constructed: a Polish-American Jew.

The poet makes this character say that Philip Larkin is an uninteresting and boring person. The reader of the poem cannot avoid asking the question: is he right? One should be careful with the answer: this text can easily be misread either as pure masochism or as sharp anti-cosmopolitan satire. Neither of these readings would make it possible to interpret the text in its richness, although there is an element of truth in both. It is typical and significant that we see Balokowsky at an airport, in a state of homelessness. The implied poet is different: Larkin needs the feeling of home, but realizes again and again that “Home is So Sad” (to quote the title of a poem in *The Whitsun Weddings*).

The situations in “Naturally the Foundation” and “Posterity” are very similar: they both show the protagonist waiting for his flight and placing himself outside of national history (including the chronology constructed by a community). However, in the former poem the professor betrays his own culture, whereas Balokowsky comes from a completely different background. Since he is reading Larkin, the reader of the poem may feel encouraged to see Larkin through his eyes, although the urge to do the opposite, that is, to see Balokowsky through Larkin’s eyes may be stronger. Nevertheless, unlike the speaker of the other poem, Balokowsky can be interpreted as a mask. Andrew Motion points out the common denominator: “they [Larkin and Balokowsky] both experience a similar tension between romantic longings and pragmatic needs” (*Philip Larkin*. Contemporary Writers ser. 67).

The young scholar in “Posterity”, as the second line says, “has *this* page microfilmed”, that is the page containing this poem. The statement is both absurd and meaningful. Balokowsky is identical with creation itself: he is an emblem for the eternal present of writing and reading. This is the *metaphorical* meaning of this figure (I referred to a metonymic meaning previously). Time stands still in this poem. The author and his hero<sup>2</sup> meet in a small unit of time signified by the few hours the scholar spends at an airport, but also by the duration of time the actual reader devotes to reading the poem.

---

<sup>2</sup> The two, of course, change places in the poem: Larkin becomes the “hero” of a prospective book written by Balokowsky.

### 3.1.4. *Time, Death and Work*

Time as continuity is also removed from the situation of the person who is being taken to hospital in “Ambulances” (CP 132-33). Just like an airplane as an important underlying image in “Naturally the Foundation” and “Posterity”, an ambulance is a closed unit separated from the dynamically flowing historical time surrounding it:

Closed like confessionals, they thread  
 Loud noons of cities, giving back  
 None of the glances they absorb.  
 Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,  
 They come to rest at any kerb:  
 All streets in time are visited.

Not only is an ambulance a closed world but also like a confessional, with all the ambivalence of the image: attractive and repelling, giving hope and setting up a barrier, belonging to us and to a different sphere simultaneously. The last line of the stanza quoted above also implies its similarity with death: nobody can avoid it. Everyone is “visited”, as the speaker (using a Larkinesque pun) says, “in time”. The understatement is the same as in the allusion to a dying person in “Days”: we are visited “in time”, but the last visit will take us out of time.

Whereas in the first stanza the ambulance is *like* death, in the metonymy of stanza two they become identical. As the sick person is separated from historical time, static images start predominating. The stretcher recalls the vision of a bier; the verb “stowed” and the pronoun “it” suggest that s/he is treated as a lifeless object (the uncertainty of gender is also a meaningful ellipsis):

The children strewn on steps or road,  
 Or women coming from the shops  
 Past smells of different dinners, see  
 A wild white face that overtops  
 Red stretcher-blankets momentarily  
 As it is carried in and stowed,

The crowd suddenly becomes the congregation of a ritual. They feel moved while they let the ambulance pass; then the distance between the sick person leaving for the unknown and the crowd staying in the street widens:

Far

From the exchange of love to lie  
Unreachable inside a room  
The traffic parts to let go by  
Brings closer what is left to come,  
And dulls to distance all we are.

The metonymy “exchange of love” refers both to sincere love and the commerce of sex (prostitution); the complexity of the phrase (because of the tension between the two meanings) becomes a synecdoche of human life. The “room” in which one is “Unreachable” refers to the ambulance, a hospital ward and a coffin simultaneously. The syntax of the closure quoted above is complicated: the grammatical subject is the long phrase from “Far” to “let go by”; the predicates are “brings closer” and “dulls to distance”. The moment represented in the poem is unexpected by the participants: they do not know the sick person, they just happen to be in the street. This sudden encounter with the possibility of dying “brings closer” the consciousness of their mortality, but it also “dulls to distance” the mystery of personal extinction: death is unknowable from the perspective of life. This is why the image of the ambulance is a central symbol in Larkin’s poetry: it is a part of life, but it contains death the same way as in his poetics presence contains the notion of “elsewhere” (Bayley 95).

This is one conclusion drawn from the comprehension of days as prisons: if we want to be “less deceived”, we need moments when we quit the routine of everyday life<sup>3</sup>, and get closer to a transcendental world, which will always be “out of reach”, as he writes in “Here”. The other possibility is to find the material essence of days in work (as an opposite of the inactivity shown in “MCMXVI”). “Toads” (CP 89-90) opens with an image of the animal in the title, signifying the daily routine that being in a job means to a middle-class man:

---

<sup>3</sup> The word “everyday” and the title “Days” are related to each other in the stylistics of Larkin’s poetry and the aesthetics of the Movement. In *Purity of Diction* Donald Davie asserts: “if the poet who coins new metaphors *enlarges* the language, the poet who enlivens dead metaphors can be said to *purify* the language” (28, emphases in the original). In “Days” Larkin enlivens the colloquial metaphor “everyday”.

Why should I let the toad work  
Squat on my life?

The manuscript gives evidence that this was the vision that Larkin had when he started to write the first sketches eventually leading to this poem (Tolley, *Larkin at Work* 48). If this image is the non-verbal experience that is preserved in the poem, one should ask the question: what is the essence of the experience? The vision is the vehicle, rather than the tenor, of the metaphor in the poem. However, the toad-image already contains the meaning that is explained in the first line. It is an allegory, not a symbol, in Paul de Man's terminology. The experience to be preserved is a poetic vision, not only what is seen through this vision. In other words, it is a sign with a signified and a signifier. It is visual, but controlled by the structure of language.

The monotony of daily work weighed heavy on Larkin's mind from his early twenties. In a letter written at the age of twenty he constructed another allegory:

We are all rats in a big machine that feeds us—but we must keep it running, or it won't feed us. Plenty of people aren't good enough for anything else. But personally I object. Though my arguments would be more impressive if I had any definite alternative. (Letter 49)

"Toads" was written when he had already accepted the existence of the "toad", and the role of the conscientious librarian became an integral part of his personality. The comic speaker of this poem is a civil servant revolting against monotony and conformism, but treating this rebellious tendency as an illness and fighting against it:

Ah, were I courageous enough  
To shout *Stuff your pension!*  
But I know, all too well, that's the stuff  
That dreams are made on:

As James Booth points out, in these lines Larkin "wickedly clashes colloquial 'bad language' against one of the most classically beautiful lines in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" (*Philip Larkin: Writer* 99). Larkin also confirmed that the dual meaning was intentional (SL 652). This is what Prospero says in Shakespeare:

We are such stuff  
 As dreams are made on, and our little life  
 Is rounded with a sleep.  
 (*The Tempest* IV, 1, 156-158)

Our life in history is surrounded by another kind of existence, which is “out of reach”. It is inevitable that we should stick to the toad that dwells within us, but also to the concept of life as a dream, even though these are two different worlds, as the closure of the poem suggests:

I don't say, one bodies the other  
 One's spiritual truth;  
 But I do say it's hard to lose either,  
 When you have both.

“Toads” demonstrates that apart from negative images, visions of nihilism and annihilation, Larkin also constructed affirmative voices, however dejected and disillusioned his speakers may be. In “For Sidney Bechet” (*CP* 83) the phrase “an enormous yes” is an obvious example: it refers not only to the ecstasy evoked by jazz but also to the possibility of initiation into a community. In “Toads Revisited” (*CP* 147-48) he imagines, then rejects, a life without work:

No, give me my in-tray,  
 My loaf-haired secretary,  
 My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir:  
 What else can I answer,

When the lights come on at four  
 At the end of another year?  
 Give me your arm, old toad:  
 Help me down Cemetery Road.

The persona is disillusioned by the monotony of days, and he is aware (like in “Nothing To Be Said” or in “Wants”) that work is only one of those strategies that distract our attention

from the consciousness of death. Days are prisons, but before we reach the end of “Cemetery Road”, where we cannot share the final experience with others, we belong to a community. When Larkin intends to preserve experience for other people, he emphasizes the only certainty of life. Writing a poem is his stratagem to remain within a life containing values, although he is aware that this is a make-believe game.

The penultimate poem of *The Whitsun Weddings*, “Afternoons” (CP 121), is, again, a faint echo of “Days”: the title refers to a part of the day, and the plural suggests monotonous repetition. The sight of the recreation park in the autumn can be seen as a secular version of the church building in “Church Going”: both represent a unity of birth and decay. Time is transformed into space in this poem, too, offering a further example of Larkin’s method of “transferring” experience. The mothers with their children appear in the “hollows”, that is in the pits or holes of afternoons. The implied poet sees the lives of young women as variations on the same theme; moreover, he constructs an image out of requisites suggesting that they are faceless members of a crowd rather than autonomous individuals. The lack of names is as significant here as in “MCMXVI” and “At Grass”. In contrast with what is “behind them”, this absence tacitly suggests what is before them, the inevitability of aging and death:

Behind them, at intervals,  
Stand husbands in skilled trades,  
An estateful of washing,  
And the albums, lettered  
*Our Wedding*, lying  
Near the television:

I referred to the temporal, spatial and abstract meanings of “behind” at the beginning of this chapter. Importantly, the secularized “sacred corner” is also a part of this image: the television set and the photograph album (containing closed moments of the past) have occupied the place formerly taken by the altar of the house. The album represents the past and certainty, but the women also see the future *before* them, their courting places ruined, replaced by demands of child-rearing. This is the particular signification of the general meaning I indicated previously: aging and death. As Larkin says in “Dockery and Son”, the children “diluted” their lives (CP 153). Their happiness belongs to the past, and they are not even able to use the possibilities of their own existence. Their beauty and all the values from the former years are being pushed “to the side of their own lives”.

These women are in the same space where the speakers of “Days” live, but they do not see the vision constructed in the second stanza of that poem and, consequently, they cannot form a notion of time. This also means that when their minds transform units of time (seasons and parts of days) into space, they blind themselves to the continuity of time. (When we read that the courting places are still courting places, this recognition signifies the loss of temporal continuity in a vision of spatial continuity, rather than a perception, let alone the cognition, of time.) The women deceive themselves; nevertheless, they find a place of resistance. The implied poet watches them from a “less deceived” position, but he is not patronizing. He suggests: deceived or not deceived, we need places of resistance against the absurdity of extinction. “Days” says that the continuity of time means the unhappiness caused by the consciousness of death; “Afternoons” implied that one can resist it and deceive oneself by being closed into a unit of time. Such units are constructed as images of rooms in Larkin: they are the ambivalent representations of borders and freedom (see Booth, “A Room without a View”). One can re-construct (or re-structure) small units of time as places of resistance. In an early poem Larkin represented it in the fight between a street lamp and daybreak:

I think I noticed once  
 – T’was morning – one sole street-lamp still bright-lit,  
 Which, with a senile grin, like an old dunce,  
     Vied the blue sky, and tried to rival it;  
 And, leering pallid though its use was done,  
 Tried to cast shadow contrary to the sun.  
 (“Street Lamps”, *CP* 230)

The personification of the lamp anticipates the human figures (mainly old people) defeated by time in the mature poems.

### 3.1.5. *Living in Time*

Human life, therefore, can only be caught in such units: places in temporal existence, which create an illusion of atemporality and (as an important understatement) of immortality. In the context of the life work, the poems from *The Whitsun Weddings* previously discussed offer a theoretical background for some of the poems in *High Windows*. The three dramatic



monologues of “Livings” (*CP* 186-188) serve as an example. The strange title is significant for more than one reason. It recalls phrases such as “what do you do for a living?” alluding to work; but it also forms an antonym of “dying” (rather than death). Moments of living are shown both as the opposites and the antecedents of the moment of dying.

The speaker of the first poem is a grain merchant, and the year—as revealed in the last line—is 1929. The telegraphic style of the first two stanzas constructs the stereotypical character of a businessman. In contrast with that, the last stanza is meditative rather than factual:

Later, the square is empty: a big sky  
 Drains down the estuary like the bed  
 Of a gold river, and the Customs House  
 Still has its office lit. I drowse  
 Between ex-Army sheets, wondering why  
 I think it's worth while coming. Father's dead:  
 He used to, but the business now is mine.  
 It's time for change, in nineteen twenty-nine.

This closure catches a moment of missing epiphany. The speaker, who is between sleeping and waking, contemplates the meaning of his life, but all he can achieve is some fragmentary ideas. “It's time for change”, he says, but there is no sign in the text that he really intends to alter his monotonous and solitary way of living. The function of the tension between the monologue form and the year is the same as that between the description and the year in “MCMXIV”: for the reader today, 1929 means something that the speaker cannot be aware of. Thus, the reader sees the situation both from the inside and from the outside, developing a dual attitude of insight and judgement.

In the second part (perhaps Larkin's most enigmatic poem) the speaker's identity is ambiguous. For most critics he appears to be a lighthouse-keeper (Motion, *Philip Larkin* 416), but he can also be interpreted as a ship steward or as a fortune-teller (Wain 361). Whichever of these (and many more) the reader prefers, s/he will surely see him/her as a person close to nature. The speaker describes the setting as an exciting and dynamic system:

Rocks writhe back to sight.  
 Mussels, limpets,

Husband their tenacity  
 In the freezing slither –  
 Creatures, I cherish you!

By day, sky builds  
 Grape-dark over the salt  
 Unsown stirring fields.  
 Radio rubs its legs,  
 Telling me of elsewhere:

In the euphoria of solitude s/he sees the rocks and the sea as animate beings; and the same euphoria forms the basis of the Coleridgean exclamation: “Creatures, I cherish you!” As John Wain writes, this recalls the ancient mariner blessing the water snakes “unaware”, with the difference that “this man, at any rate, will never deserve to have the murdered body of an albatross hung round his neck” (359). The reason, one may add, is that s/he lives in a culture that forms harmony with nature. Coleridge’s ancient mariner violated nature when he shot the albatross; in the mind of Larkin’s speaker, however, even the radio behaves like a cricket.

James Booth sees a parallel between this poem and Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden”: “For the seventeenth-century poet privacy is an Edenic garden; for his twentieth-century successor it is the lighthouse-keeper’s lonely cell. But the two poets’ passion for solitude is essentially the same” (“Philip Larkin: Lyricism” 193). One can notice a further difference. Marvell wrote:

Society is all but rude  
 To this delicious solitude.  
 (Gardner 335)

There is no such conflict between nature and culture in Larkin’s poem: man-made objects have become parts of nature, not unlike in Betjeman’s landscape poetry. The speaker has placed himself outside of history and, once again, the uncertainty of his (her?) identity is meaningful: a more obviously constructed character would be a part of history by definition. The happiness belongs to a verbally shaped figure, not any pre-verbal experience. He is constructed as the manifestation of an ideal (an experience that takes place in the mind) rather than as an actor in history.

The setting of the third part is identified as 18<sup>th</sup>-century Cambridge on the basis of the description and the vocabulary (Wain 357). As opposed to the previous part, this one forms a poignant contrast between the natural environment and the idyll of the students' intimate world:

Tonight we dine without the Master  
 (Nocturnal vapours do not please);  
 The port goes round so much the faster,  
 Topics are raised with no less ease –

.....  
 The fields around are cold and muddy,  
 The cobbled streets close by are still,  
 A sizar shivers at his study,  
 The kitchen cat has made a kill;

The implication is that idyll can be created only by separation from the world and interpreting reality with the terminology of the Gospel. The “disciples” have dinner “without the Master”, and every word of this statement in the first line can be interpreted in the context of the Bible. This biblical vocabulary is reinforced in line eight:

Why is Judas like Jack Ketch?

The Last Supper is repeated in the evening ritual, but Jesus, the Logos is absent (just as in Browning's “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”, to which Larkin owes not only the monologue form but also the mimicry of the informal discourse of a congregation). This can be read at various levels (depending on the reader's taste and metaphysical belief): no state of grace is achieved, Pentecost does not arrive for the disciples, or, most obviously, the Cambridge students of the poem are captured by the pleasant but monotonous repetition of their days.

Most readers will probably interpret “Livings” as one cohesive (if not coherent) text. Larkin would not have agreed with this: as he wrote to Barbara Everett, originally he had planned a longer series of monologues, but after the third one he ran out of ideas. He also added: “They haven't any connection with each other, or meaning, but are supposed to be

exciting in their separate ways” (*SL* 653). It is, however, precisely this “excitement” that causes the reader to be more perceptive than usual, and, as a result, s/he will notice common features in the three poems, no matter what the author’s original intention was. It is notable that the speaker in each text is a persona caught and limited by his daily routine. From a psychological point of view, the situation in all the three poems can be interpreted either as consciously constructed idyll, or as a psychic condition resting on self-deception (illusion or rationalization): for the grain merchant a journey is a safe “place” of intimacy (but the year is 1929), the lighthouse-keeper escapes to the euphoria of solitude (but the sea is threatening), and the Cambridge students take delight in identifying themselves with the disciples (but the surrounding nature is dangerous). Formally speaking, intertextuality is equally important in the three parts. As pointed out previously, Browning, Coleridge, Marvell and Betjeman are in the background, but one should also add Yeats with the joint motifs of the tower and solitude. In his effort “to be different from himself” (see Chapter 2.3), Larkin constructed characters whose symbolic value is stronger than of those in his earlier monologues (such as “Mr Bleaney”, “Dockery and Son”, “Self’s the Man”). The three speakers of “Livings” are puppets in a show, which invites the audience to forget about time as continuity.

### 3.1.6. Genealogy

In sharp contrast with these idyllic pictures of intimacy and imagined stability constructed in situations where time stands still, when Larkin faces continuity in time, he shudders with disgust. If historical time is best described in an image of genealogy, that is to our detriment. He describes this and warns us of the danger in “This Be The Verse” (*CP* 180), a poem whose first stanza is surely one of the most shocking openings in world literature:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad,  
           They may not mean to, but they do.  
 They fill you with the faults they had  
           And add some extra, just for you.

This is the same furious voice that we can hear at the beginning of “The Old Fools”: “What do they think has happened, the old fools, / To make them like this?” (*CP* 196) The syntax is also the same: the phrase “your mum and dad” following and explaining the pronoun “they”

creates a casual and colloquial style.<sup>4</sup> The reason for the anger is obvious: the speaker is aware that he is one of the people the poem is about, although he sticks to using “they” and “you”. The obscene phrasal verb “fuck up” in the first line is ambiguous in a dramatic and poetic way: it refers to begetting a child and spoiling something simultaneously. This follows from the immanent logic of Larkin’s world view: if all changes are changes for the worse, so is begetting children. This could hardly be said more concisely than with this obscenity. Larkin is so furious because he has found another leak in his poetics: the birth of a child is always the introduction of something new into history; therefore, it works against preserving the experience of this world in an intact (unchanged) form.

Oliver James, a clinical psychologist, has written a thoroughgoing analysis of this poem, pointing out that every element in it can be justified psychologically and genetically. As the second line says, leaving genes to one’s children is, of course, unintentional. The “extra” mentioned in the last line of stanza one is “achieved” by the mistakes made in the process of education.

If one wants to explore the reasons for general degradation, one must go back in time, as far as the previous generation. This is what the speaker does in the second stanza:

But they were fucked up in their turn  
By fools in old-style hats and coats  
Who half the time were soppy-stern  
And half at one another’s throats.

We can only become what is coded genetically and culturally. This is human misery itself, as the last stanza says:

Man hands on misery to man.  
It deepens like a coastal shelf.

---

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Dunn, who was strongly influenced by Larkin at the beginning of his career, also uses this structure of topicalization in his poetry. “The Hunchback” starts with this line: “They will not leave me, the lives of other people” (38). The subject matter is also similar to Larkin’s poem, at least in the starting point: it is the contrast between the I and the you (in the plural sense). But whereas Larkin is aware in both poems that he is a member of the community from which he separates himself by role-playing (i.e. the community of human beings in general), Dunn puts on the mask of others as an outsider: “I wear them near my eyes like spectacles” (38). After uttering the pronoun “they” both poets seem to ask: what does this mean? Larkin’s answer is: children (which I used to be) and old people (which I will become). Dunn says: it is the life of *other* people. In sum, Larkin knows that he can never fully separate himself; Dunn is aware that the plurality of cultures is no reason for disillusionment.

Get out as early as you can,  
And don't have any kids yourself.

In James's reading the implication is that the children of aggressive parents will become aggressive themselves, since bad characteristics are indestructible (16). The geological simile of the second line suggests that traumas can be expected in older age, too. As a result, an innocent and "intact" young child can still be distorted as an adult (17).

This is how far the clinical psychologist got in tracking down the ideas of the poem. His only remark about the last two lines is: "Larkin's idea of the best solution was not very helpful" (18). One should, however, remember that this text is a poem, not just a document of social psychology.

As has been shown previously, the speaker uses an extremely cynical and vulgar tone in discouraging the reader to beget children. But the title, borrowed from Robert Louis Stevenson's "Requiem" (Motion, *Philip Larkin* 373), gives this message a different meaning by changing the text into a credo. It suggests that since man can leave only misery to his posterity, both love-making and begetting children are immoral. What makes Larkin disillusioned is the lack of profound human consciousness. *This be the* verse, the speaker tells posterity, as his last will; that is to say, the poem should reflect the human deficiency of working against happiness—this is the implication of the tension between the title and the text of the poem. Distinguishing the speaker from the implied poet determines the dramatic form and the structure; the organizing principle is not self-expression, but the juxtaposition of two points of view.

Whereas the text declares that human continuity is inevitably deterioration, the title says that poetry still needs to be written. The reader is invited to read backwards: the gap<sup>5</sup> after the last line contains the instruction to go back to the title. The speaker is a pagan prophet warning humankind against an apocalyptic future; meanwhile, an emblematic poet signified by the allusion to Stevenson watches this figure from the outside, fulfilling the criteria of Bakhtin's sympathetic co-experiencing.

As some critics have recently pointed out, Bakhtin's terminology can be applied to poetry, too, not only to the novel (see Wesling). His term sympathetic co-experiencing describes the relationship between the author and the protagonist as Bakhtin saw it: the author

---

<sup>5</sup> I mean the gap that the reader finds after any poem in a volume of poetry, something that distinguishes poetry from prose. The space we find after a poem always encourages us to think it over and/or re-read it before we go on to the next text.

understands the hero's fate as that of the *other*. This way s/he develops a dialogic relationship between two subjects. Rather than seeing a monologic declaration in Larkin's text, I have offered a dialogic reading, the two fictitious speakers being very distinct: one is the cynical old man of "High Windows"; the other is the father figure signified by the quotation in the title. A fictionalized Larkin and a fictionalized Stevenson play a game forming two sides that could be identified as the id and the superego, the *anima* and the *animus*, or the romantic and the disillusioned poet.

But the reader does not need to know Stevenson's poem to enjoy Larkin's. Exploring intertextuality is only one possible way of constructing its meaning, not the only one, and not more important than any other way. However, the poem has become a target of re-writings, creating an endless process of reading. The authors of the four re-writings I know about all count on the reader's knowledge of Larkin's text, and all of them narrow down the scope of possible meanings. Maurice Rutherford kept the obscenity of the original but domesticated the image; Roger McGough wrote an angry pamphlet against Larkin; Adrian Mitchell deprived the text of its original vulgarity and turned the meaning upside down; and Benjamin Zephaniah wrote a political song in the context of postcolonial class antagonism.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of begetting children<sup>7</sup> Larkin "begot" a poem and, ironically, he became a part of a symbolic genealogy. Stevenson's poem begot Larkin's, Larkin's begot a number of further texts. The poet captured by days "got out of it": the literal meaning of the poem (the imperative of putting an end to human history) has become the continuity of literature.

---

<sup>6</sup> For further details of the re-writings see my article "This Be the Light Verse".

<sup>7</sup> Although (as far as possible) I refrain from using biography in this study, I need to be precise. Larkin never fathered a child, but he was very close when a married woman he had an affair with became pregnant. However, she miscarried.

### 3.2. Aging

According to Larkin's poetics, the poet cannot speak about death, but he can speak and write poems about mortal human beings. The consciousness of mortality makes it possible for us to shape a concept of time. In the previous chapter I demonstrated how units of chronology signify an indirect sensation of time through the tropes in the poems; in this chapter I will focus on how aging serves as a figure of temporality in Larkin.

#### 3.2.1. *From Birth to Old Age*

When a human being is born, aging starts immediately, and this process puts us onto a narrow track. A poem in *The Less Deceived*, "Born Yesterday" (CP 84) has an equally narrow scope of readings, as occasional pieces usually do. But the referential language of the text and its straightforward diction become symbolic of human life and its borders: the experience transferred into the poem cannot "overflow", as feelings are supposed to do in Wordsworth's poetics. The act of birth, the narrowness of expectations and the absurdity of human life (since the goal is death) are all shared experiences. Larkin's determinism is stretched. It is not a human being who "has an experience": aging as a basic experience holds us in captivity.

"Born Yesterday" evokes both the story of Sleeping Beauty and Yeats's poem "A Prayer for my Daughter". Yeats wrote:

May she be granted beauty and yet not  
Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,  
(*Yeats's Poems* 295)

Larkin echoes these lines:

May you be ordinary;  
Have, like other women,  
An average of talents:

After these similar starting points the two texts go in different directions. Yeats's poem creates a vision of the totality of human life and that of hope, particularly in the image of "the



spreading laurel tree” in the last line. Larkin narrows down the meaning: following the tradition of Betjemanesque light verse, and also parodying it, he does not let the idea of *aurea mediocritas* in the sense Yeats thought of it predominate the text. Instead, he makes a surprising point:

In fact, may you be dull –  
If that is what skilled,  
Vigilant, flexible,  
Unemphasized, enthralled  
Catching of happiness is called.

This is the idea of ordinariness stretched to the extreme. The conditional clause, characteristic of Larkin’s supercilious speakers, brings bitterness to this playful text. This is particularly emphasized by the word “catching” in the last line; Larkin himself remarked that with the gerund form he intended to indicate a life-long process (*SL* 250). If we live in a world in which there is no other way of achieving happiness, we need to bear the burden of being “ordinary”.

This subject matter is written about in a different register in “Wires” (*CP* 48), an eight-line descriptive poem in *The Less Deceived*. The position of its speaker is that of an observer who evaluates what he sees from the outside of a situation. The wires in the title mean the electrical fences surrounding a herd of cattle. This creates an atmosphere of imprisonment, which is reinforced by the *abcd dcba* rhyme scheme:

The widest prairies have electric fences,  
For though old cattle know they must not stray  
Young steers are always scenting purer water  
Not here but elsewhere. Beyond the wires

Leads them to blunder up against the wires  
Whose muscle-shredding violence gives no quarter.  
Young steers become old cattle from that day,  
Electric limits to their widest senses.

The rhyme in the centre is formed by the repetition of “wires”, which puts in the middle what is at the margin in the image: the limit. This seemingly awkward, non-poetic repetition suggests an antagonism. In the sentence “Beyond the wires / Leads them to blunder up against the wires” the phrase “beyond the wires” fulfils the grammatical function of the subject. Thus, “beyond the wires” and “against the wires” refer to two different worlds: one accessible (within reach) the other inaccessible (or, to use another phrase by Larkin, “out of reach”). What is “out of reach” causes the creatures in the poem “to blunder up against the wires”, and it is something pure (significantly, Larkin uses this word with both physical and spiritual connotations, rather than “clear”). This is contrasted by “gives no quarter” at the other side of the rhyme, indicating the impossibility of finding pure water. The reader can follow the track of the rhymes leading from the centre of the poem towards the first and last lines. The interaction of lines 2 and 7 implies the presence of fate and the impossibility of changing the situation: the “imprisoned” animals become “old” (also suggesting wise and experienced) when they understand that the outside world is out of their reach. The closing line is the mirror image of the first: the adjectives “widest” and “electric” change places. Wideness, which is still a part of objective reality in the opening, becomes a signifier of imprisoned values in the closure. It will be noticed that Larkin does not form any value judgement: he only says that *all these exist*: the inner world of the animals, their own life space, the pure water out of their reach, and the merciless electric fences.

Since “Wires” is a poem about aging, the meadow surrounded by fences becomes a metaphor of lifetime. Young and old animals are within the same borders, and the only way they can acquire experience about these limits (metaphorically: the chronology of their lives) is through pain. In accordance with Larkin’s epistemology, suffering enables a subject to be “less deceived”, that is, to gain knowledge.

Larkin’s animal poems all imply that their experience is non-verbal, since these protagonists cannot speak, and our human understanding of animals’ experience is probably falsified. Consequently, animal experience always shares a feature with the human experience of personal extinction. As I suggested in Chapter 2.5, one of Larkin’s central poems, “Nothing To Be Said” implies that death is non-verbal by definition. One cannot speak about death authentically, but the poet can write poems about subjects “advancing towards death”. It is symbolic, therefore, that in *The Whitsun Weddings* this text is followed by a portrait, “Love Songs in Age” (CP 113). The title does not refer to the genre: it is not a poem consisting of songs (as most readers would expect); it is *about* songs, more precisely about their presence in a room. The protagonist is a widow living among her objects recalling the past:

She kept her songs, they took so little space,  
 The covers pleased her:  
 One bleached from lying in a sunny place,  
 One marked in circles by a vase of water.

The character in the poem (like those in a number of other texts by Larkin) is trying to find meaning in words. Similarly to the contemplative speakers in “Maiden Name” and “Church Going”, she would like to have back what she thought had been lost:

She found them, looking for something else, and stood  
  
 Relearning how each frank submissive chord  
 Had ushered in  
 Word after sprawling hyphenated word,

The long lost emotion returns to her “like a spring-woken tree”. The simile works the same way as it usually does in Larkin: apart from the comparison, it also suggests the lack of identity that a metaphor would represent. The protagonist of the poem is *only* like a tree in the spring, but cannot become one: she cannot be a plant assimilating the valuable parts of the environment.<sup>1</sup> The conflict between desire and inability justifies the almost mawkish closure about the satisfaction love can (or cannot) offer:

The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love  
 Broke out, to show  
 Its bright insipience sailing above,  
 Still promising to solve, and satisfy,  
 And set unchangeably in order. So  
 To pile them back, to cry,  
 Was hard, without lamely admitting how

---

<sup>1</sup> In *The Mirror and the Lamp*, M. H. Abrams points out that the most frequent images representing the romantic way of thinking are the apparatus of lamps, fountains, wind-harps (Aeolian lyres) and the image of the living plant. This last is particularly meaningful, since a plant creates something new by assimilating elements of the environment (68-69). Larkin challenges the image of the plant as an allegory of the autonomous individual by emphasizing the gap between trees and human beings. Likewise, in the early poem “Street Lamps” he constructs an ironic image of an apparatus trying to create artificial light.

It had not done so then, and could not now.

The pronoun “it” in the last line refers to “love”, a word Larkin also used in place of the pronoun in the original version (SL 345). The poem implies questions about the general nature of love, and the answer (as also elsewhere in Larkin) can only be paradoxical. Words have lost their meaning, the love songs of the past are not sung in the present, but the crying at the end of the poem brings catharsis. To use Larkin’s own categorization: this is a text of beauty, not a text of truth. Truth would be achieved by finding the meaning of the words, which could give an answer to the questions about love. It does not happen in the poem, but the desire for affection “pleases” not only the old widow but also the author and the reader, which results in the “beauty” of the situation. (Larkin uses the verb “please” to form the same contrast as in “Church Going”: the beauty of the situation is accessible to him, but he cannot grasp the reason.) This is both a failure and a success of the speaker: an aesthetic value is created, but the “truth” (as a category of epistemology) in the “universe” of the poem is hidden. Discovering it would only be possible through finding the essence of time passing, through detecting the signifiers of the old lyrics the widow has accidentally found. The sheets are “bleached” like the shopkeepers’ names in “MCMXVI”, signifying a gradual loss of meaning. The treasure trove just discovered only *promises* “to solve and satisfy”; the desired “order” of the widow’s life (structuring time) remains an illusion.

### 3.2.2. *Witnessing the Passing of Time*

Discovering the past has only one certain result: it brings it home to us that we are aging. The opening poem of *High Windows*, “To the Sea” (CP 173-74) is a typical example of this idea with its mixture of idyll and irony. The title can be interpreted as a phrase recalling classic odes (such as “To Autumn”), but also as an adverb of place, since the speaker walks “to the sea” in the first line, and approaches the peculiar “gaiety of seashores”:

To step over the low wall that divides  
 Road from concrete walk above the shore  
 Brings sharply back something known long before –  
 The miniature gaiety of seashores.  
 Everything crowds under the low horizon:

Steep beach, blue water, towels, red bathing caps,  
 The small hushed waves' repeated fresh collapse  
 Up the warm yellow sand, and further off  
 A white steamer stuck in the afternoon.

The white steamer in the last line, which forms a poignant contrast with the colours of the beach, transforms time into space, just like the poems discussed in the previous chapter, particularly "Afternoons": in this poem "the afternoon" becomes a part of the seaside. The temporal movement of the boat penetrates into it, and in this trope time becomes the fourth dimension of space. The *passing* of time is only signified by the changes of colours and spatial movement in the last stanza:

The white steamer has gone. Like breathed-on glass  
 The sunlight has turned milky. If the worst  
 Of flawless weather is our falling short,  
 It may be that through habit these do best,  
 Coming to water clumsily undressed  
 Yearly; teaching children by a sort  
 Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.

The closure shows the ambivalence of idyll and irony mentioned previously: "clowning" is a part of the idyll (just like the adjective "miniature" in stanza one), but also a sign of the speaker's irony. The same applies to the Larkinesque "as they ought": it refers to something customary and something imposed on the actors (Motion, *Philip Larkin* 394). John Bayley has perceptively written that the source of humour in the last lines of the poem is a sense of being "elsewhere" (172): the implied poet sees the beach as a symbol of freedom, but he still detaches himself from it. This contributes to the ambivalence of his perspective; Larkin himself must have alluded to this when labelling this text as self-parody (SL 420).

It establishes an ironic and parodic relationship with his earlier and later poems about childhood, middle-age and old age. The generations that are furious and disillusioned in "This Be The Verse" (following "To the Sea" later in *High Windows*) in this text exist peacefully together. The ironic reading of the poem, however, leads us to the idea that this is all in vain: old age and death are waiting for us at the end of a road that is full of such distractions. Of course, this reading is possible only because we can also give the poem a non-ironic reading,

and this will also linger on in our consciousness. Who would doubt, after all, that people should take care of children and elderly parents?

The third poem of *High Windows*, “The Trees” (CP 166) constructs nostalgia and its parody in terms of literary history. The vehicle of the simile “like a spring-woken tree” returns here as a tenor. The speaker is in search of a profane symbol (much the same way as the widow in “Love Songs in Age” was looking for lost meanings), something that was used and understood by poets of earlier generations. The experience described in the first stanza is one of the most frequent poetic *topi*: the image of trees putting forth leaves in springtime. This determines the genre that appears on the poetic horizon if one gives it a linear reading and stops after the title and the first line. This form is the *reverdie*, the classic poem celebrating the rebirth of the earth in the spring (Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* 437). The first stanza follows its pattern closely:

The trees are coming into leaf  
Like something almost being said;  
The recent buds relax and spread,  
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

The word “almost” in the second line has the same function as in the last stanza of “An Arundel Tomb”: on the one hand, it means that the trees say nothing; on the other hand, it suggests that the implied poet wants them to speak. Consequently, it reveals a romantic poet, who has a strong desire to find meaning in an archetypal image, but also an agnostic poet, who has given up the hope that any meaning can be found in it. The trees are like Prufrock’s mermaids: they will not speak to him. But the bursting buds are “a kind of grief”, and the speaker tries to find the reason in the second stanza:

Is it that they are born again  
And we grow old? No, they die too.  
Their yearly trick of looking new  
Is written down in rings of grain.

For Larkin nature does not form the basis of any myth. The rebirth of trees is only a “trick”, mere illusion. Actually, they are also mortal: every grain takes them closer to their death. Grief, therefore, is not caused by the “eternal youth” of trees as opposed to the mortality of

humans; if we still see trees as symbols of immortality, we deceive ourselves. “Yet” trees have their own secret, as the last stanza says:

Yet still the unresting castles thresh  
In fullgrown thickness every May.  
Last year is dead, they seem to say,  
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

The destination of life is death, but each life consists of autonomous units of time (such as years), and their “deaths” help life itself. (Importantly, the epithet “unresting” is used for buds here; in “Aubade” it is used with “death”. Birth and extinction have the same roots.) This is how trees can become icons of the principle of transforming the consciousness of death into a strategy of life.

The question, then, is: will the trees lead the implied poet back to the sanctity of yearly rebirth? Or, to use the vocabulary of the poem: will the trees “say” anything to him? The last stanza, quoted above, repeats the suggestion of the first one as an answer to this question: “almost”. It must be noticed that Larkin writes: “they *seem* to say”, that is, this meaning is constructed in the speaker’s mind. Illusion does not become reality: beauty does not become true. The attitude of the implied poet to the trees representing life and rebirth is, again, ambivalent: on the one hand, he has a strong desire for pantheistic faith; on the other, he sees the obstinate life force of the trees with a touch of irony. The strongly iambic word “afresh”, repeated three times in the last line, is no celebration of nature; it only suggests the admiration of its unconscious power with detachment. The implied poet, however, has preserved his intellectual superiority at the price of facing death. The trees are powerful, because they are unaware of extinction, and this draws a borderline between them and the *human* speaker: the same border that readers of Larkin know from his animal poems.

The silence of the trees means the loneliness of the protagonist. The solitude of the implied poet in *High Windows* has its roots so deep that only another elemental emotion, love, would be able to eliminate his alienation. Love, however, cannot become an integral part of his life; the result of this absence is his constant anguish. (As an important antecedent, the same can be seen in some of Byron’s heroes, such as Manfred, offering further evidence of Larkin’s affiliation with romanticism.) The implied poet is aware of his inability to love, and this is aesthetically accomplished in the “I” of the poems: the personal experience is

“transferred” into a verbal form. The act of writing the poem, however, also includes the fight for the capacity to love, which contributes to the construction of the poet’s identity.

### 3.2.3. *Questions about Freedom*

Freedom, which is the condition of creating an identity, can be of many kinds. Every generation is liberated from an old inhibition that the previous generation was still bound by, as is suggested in “High Windows” (CP 165). We got rid of God, and the youths today have got rid of sexual taboos, says the bitterly cynical speaker of the poem:

When I see a couple of kids  
And guess he’s fucking her and she’s  
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,  
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives –  
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side  
Like an outdated combine harvester,  
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if  
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,  
And thought *That’ll be the life;*  
*No God any more, or sweating in the dark*

*About hell and that, or having to hide*  
*What you think of the priest. He*  
*And his lot will all go down the long slide*  
*Like free bloody birds.*

Discussing Larkin’s poems written in the vulgar register that features in the first line of this text, Laurence Lerner has remarked that although they start in an obscene tone, they usually betray a strong desire to achieve ethereal purity (*Philip Larkin* 30). Joseph Bristow sees this



duality from a different point of view: in his interpretation Larkin can imagine the “high windows” representing transcendence only by creating a world of obscenity (181). But Bristow’s conclusion that this should be a sign of hostility cannot be justified from the text.

Janice Rossen offers an extensive analysis of the aesthetic function of “strong language” and colloquial idiom in Larkin’s poetry, and remarks: “I think that he avoids hard books and ideas largely because they pose too great a threat to his own ideas and creativity” (97). This also suggests that Larkin, instead of eluding the basic questions of philosophy (as is sometimes falsely believed), reconstructed them in his autonomous world containing both obscenity and ethereal purity. This is why one can agree with Richard Rorty’s reading of Larkin quoted previously: Larkin chose the role of the philosopher rather than that of the “strong poet” (25), and with David Lodge, who draws a parallel between Larkin and Wittgenstein. The implied poet in “High Windows” speaks about “nonverbal reality” in human language, while also struggling to understand this paradox (“Philip Larkin: the Metonymic Muse” 127). Or, as Eduard Vlad has put it, in this poem Larkin articulates the inarticulate (106).

The previously mentioned paradox can well be seen in Larkin’s rhetoric contrasting vulgar language and traditional (even conventional) poetic qualities. He is speaking about man living in history to *a* man living in history (himself).

Erich Fromm’s words throw light on the anthropological background of this poem: “In the middle of the twentieth century the problem is no longer that of sexual repression. [...] In present-day society it is *other* impulses that are repressed; to be fully alive, to be free, and to love” (37, emphasis in the original). This phenomenon can clearly be seen in “High Windows”: the sexually liberated young people do not notice the limits to their freedom. Thus gradual liberation in accordance with the “development” of human society is mere illusion, a form of self-deception. The implied poet sees and reflects on this but, of course, not by using the generalization that is a necessary feature of the socio-psychological description quoted above. Although he makes the speaker see other people with cool detachment, this only shows that he is also an actor on the same stage: he is also involved in playing social games. That is why he needs the mask of the jealous and nagging old man, who makes himself hated by the youths (similarly to what one can see in Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium” and “The Wild Old Wicked Man”). The speaker determines the reading, since the reader judges his words on the basis of his character, as is the case with Browning’s poetry (Langbaum *The Poetry* 115). The implied poet, however, is different because a deeper layer of the poem suggests the philosophy of old age and the recognition of human barriers. This does not mean asceticism in

Larkin; he simply saw that erotic love was conquered by a civilization that is alien to him. The unasked question of the poem is this: if neither getting rid of religion, nor sexual liberation brings freedom, what can we hope for? The reader finds the answer in the last stanza:

And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:  
The sun-comprehending glass,  
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows  
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

The contrast between the two generations, both aiming at liberation, is suddenly swept away by a poetic vision: that of undifferentiated experience as the only certainty, the sight of the same blue sky as one can find in Mallarmé's "Les Fenêtres". Bruce K. Martin writes:

Indeed, the entire poem suggests that the only freedom unconditionally available to the speaker, to the "couple of kids," and to us—the only freedom in which we can truly revel—is the freedom of the mind to guess, to speculate and to imagine; in other words, the freedom to behave as a poet. (148)

While agreeing with this reading I suggest that the last stanza implies more than that. Suddenly (Larkin uses the word "immediately") the implied poet finds himself in an everyday situation. The vision contains the image of the poet working or contemplating in his room when all of a sudden his attention is distracted by the sight of the window and the blue sky behind it. The non-verbal experience that is recollected in the speaker's mind is so elemental that it does not even reach the level of linguistic articulation: "Rather than words comes the thought of high windows". The basic principle of the poetry of experience, as discussed by Langbaum, lingers on here: the experience is of primary importance, while its contemplation is only of secondary significance. This is the case in Larkin even though, paradoxically, the experience in point is non-existence, as it is in "I Remember, I Remember" and in the closure of "Dockery and Son".

A comparison with a contemporary of Larkin, Roy Fuller, may throw some light on the method of composition applied in “High Windows”. Fuller finds the use of masks vitally important:

The poet would be an intolerable egotist if he did not feel that as a poet he wore a mask that more often than not resembles other men. I think that is why in his verse he can be free with the details of his personal life—give himself away as a lesson, not a confession. (XVI)

In the same essay, written as an introduction to a collection of his poetry, he adds: “even the ‘elderly man’ of later poems cannot be guaranteed to be the poet himself” (XVIII). Fuller’s principles (although he was not a member of the Movement) are clearly shown in Larkin’s poetics, too, but the structures they construct are different. Whereas in Larkin the form is always tight, Fuller is a master of the brief lyric poem and the loosely organized short sequence. Two pieces from “Quatrains of an Elderly Man” will demonstrate this. “Kissing on the Bus” represents the contrast between old and young people that is familiar to the reader from Yeats and Larkin:

Surely I’d be as concerned about other lives  
As about my own had I the entrée to them.  
As it is, I sneer at these public youthful loves  
And smugly read the obituary column.  
(19)

The mask is also the same as in the other two poets: that of a jealous and supercilious old man. However, as opposed to them, in Fuller the persona is not polarized into two agents: in these four-liners Yeats’s and Larkin’s cognitive agent is missing. There is no persona outside of the situation: it is the speaker (a perceptive agent) within the situation who sees himself with mild irony. Self-reflexivity is a part of the poem, but directed always from the inside, as can also be seen in “Accident”:

My briefcase falls open in the street. Displayed:  
Aspirins for migraine, chocolates for my wife,  
Despite my ‘O, bugger’, strangers come to aid

The old boy picking up his bits of life.

(19)

Self-reflection and self-humour are created without detachment from the experience. The difference between the functions of obscenity in Fuller and in Larkin is telling. Larkin's speaker does not swear in "High Windows": his speaker is cold, cynical and supercilious. His only remark made on the young people is the obscene opening line of the poem. Fuller's character, on the other hand, swears instinctively, and this spontaneous behaviour makes him even more humane through the eyes of other people. This makes it possible that he eludes the inner conflict: self-irony gives place to lenient self-humour.

Whereas Fuller's poems about the elderly man are well-written and valuable pieces of light verse, Larkin's method of polarizing the persona enabled him to put his principles into practice: the complex experience of feeling pain over aging and the longing for transcendence was "transferred" into the poem.

Non-existence and the awareness of death are the experience behind "The Old Fools" (CP 196-97), too. This poem starts with a series of exasperated questions:

What do they think has happened, the old fools,  
 To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose  
 It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,  
 And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember  
 Who called this morning?

As Jenny Joseph puts it, the speaker thinks of old people not only as "fools", but also as the representatives of otherness: he makes this clear in the first line by the emphatic use of the pronoun "they". This produces the effect in the reader that s/he will also want "to join the speaker's gang", since that seems to be the only way to stay apart from a disgusting group of people (121). Larkin himself wrote: "It's rather an angry poem, but the anger is ambivalent—we are angry at the humiliation of age, but are also angry at old people for reminding us of death, and I suppose for making us feel bad about doing nothing for them" (SL 473).

Thus, the speaker is "angry" with a group of people that he himself *almost* belongs to. Only such a person can ask the questions of the first stanza. There is something perverse about the delight he feels when observing the old people who have lost control over their bodies, since he knows that he will be one of them shortly. But anger disappears in the third

stanza, and he assumes a more contemplative attitude. He wants to understand the other subject through his/her difference:

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms  
Inside your head, and people in them, acting.

He asks the same question as Tony Harrison does in his television poem *Black Daisies for the Bride*. Harrison shot this film about people suffering from Alzheimer's disease, and with the help of songs and rhythms he managed to make contact with people who were incapable of communication otherwise. The question for both poets is: what is hiding in the separate inner world of such old people? According to Larkin, this is the realm of the past fatally isolated from the present:

That is where they live:  
Not here and now, but where all happened once.  
This is why they give

An air of baffled absence, trying to be there  
Yet being here. For the rooms grow farther, leaving  
Incompetent cold, the constant wear and tear  
Of taken breath, and them crouching below  
Extinction's alp, the old fools, never perceiving  
How near it is. This must be what keeps them quiet:  
The peak that stays in view wherever we go  
For them is rising ground. Can they never tell  
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?  
Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout  
The whole hideous inverted childhood? Well,  
We shall find out.

The questions at the end of the poem are completely different from those at the beginning. This is the voice of the implied poet who is already outside of the original situation, a person who has a strong desire to solve the mystery of old age, dying and the passing of time, but knows that it is impossible. The use of "we" in the last line does not

signify his identification with otherness; it is rather the understanding of a paradox. As I wrote in Chapter 2.1: we will know the answer when we cannot remember the question any longer. Furthermore, this gap between past and present is unbridgeable not only in old age; it is an ever present condition of human existence, which makes it impossible for us to sense the continuity of life. Consequently, human life is not a process, but a plethora of moments, and these are harder and harder to connect as one gets older (Petch 95). The end of the process is that the mind “will fold into itself”, as Larkin writes in a late poem, “The Winter Palace” (*CP* 211). This also means subjective time folding into itself, which will hide both the personal past and the future (the mystery of death) from aged people.

#### 3.2.4. *Confession and Remembering*

As opposed to the “The Old Fools”, “Sad Steps” (*CP* 169) is a confessional text. The situation represented here is the same as that in “I Remember, I Remember”, “High Windows” and “The Building”: the speaker looks out of the window, and observes the contrast between the inside and the outside. (It is no accident that the title of the last volume is *High Windows*.) The seemingly everyday experience becomes a cathartic moment between wake and sleep:

Groping back to bed after a piss  
 I part thick curtains, and am startled by  
 The rapid clouds, the moon’s cleanliness.

The vision of the moon conveys at least two important meanings: on the one hand, it is a romantic and sentimental symbol of ethereal purity (forming a contrast with the vulgar colloquialism of the first line, as in other poems); on the other hand, it is the “night version” of the clear, blue sky, that is, nothingness. Both boil down to an ideal that is rooted in the image of the moon as an icon of femininity. As I remarked in Chapter 2.2, John Carey distinguishes between two conflicting attitudes in Larkin: the male voice of scepticism and the female voice of belief. The latter leads the implied poet to the ecstasy represented by the exclamations in stanza four:

Lozenge of love! Medallion of art!  
 O wolves of memory! Immensements!

In the four figures of speech (discussed in Chapter 2.6) the speaker gets close to the intention shown at the end of “High Windows”: he wants to verbalize the non-verbal experience. But “Sad Steps” does not end there. The persona is suddenly sobered down, and Larkin’s “masculine” self starts speaking:

The hardness and the brightness and the plain  
Far-reaching singleness of that wide stare

Is a reminder of the strength and pain  
Of being young; that it can’t come again,  
But is for others undiminished somewhere.

The ambivalent closure is typical of Larkin: the miracle of the night, that is a world of transcendence, does exist somewhere, but it is unreachable for the implied poet. The duality of possibility and uncertainty signifies not only the inner conflict Carey discusses but also the poet’s agnosticism.

The same agnostic attitude is re-constructed in “Annus Mirabilis” (CP 167), where humour suppresses the bitterness of experience:

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Which was rather late for me) –  
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban  
And the Beatles first LP.

The speaker is a fictitious character; the poem is not a confessional lyric. Andrew Motion writes:

In every respect, Larkin had been more fortunate in life than he says in the poem: sexual intercourse [...] began for him in 1945 not 1963, he read *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* as an adolescent, and throughout his life he got as much kick from jazz as later generations did from the Beatles. But this is not the point. What the poem wants to

know is whether a “better” life consists in these kinds of freedom at all. (*Philip Larkin* 373)

This can be known only by an act of remembering: the title of Lawrence’s novel and the name of the most popular band of the period serve as a mnemonic for the speaker (similarly to the number-plates and the “cycle-crates” in “I Remember, I Remember”). If he can recollect the emotions once aroused by the forbidden fruit of the book and the excitement caused by pop music, he can also reconstruct the spirit of the age as it was felt by the generation of the sixties. The irony of the poem is that it is not *his* generation. He can watch them only as an outsider (as in many other poems), and it is only this way that he can construct a sense of time. The year of miracles put in the title belonged to other people; his own aging, however, helps him develop a superior position and a somewhat cynical attitude.

Remembering is also the subject matter of “Forget What Did” (CP 184). As Marion Lomax has noticed, this was inspired by a girls’ novel, Susan Coolidge’s *What Katy Did*. A child in the novel keeps a diary for two weeks, but even during this short period she writes “Forgit what did” five times (40). Larkin “corrected” the comic spelling in his own title, but he did not change the syntax typical of diary entries. The full sentence, of course, would be: “I forget what I did.”

The elliptical phrase is an “objective correlative” of what was going on in Larkin’s inner world when he wrote the poem; Motion’s biography offers a list of the reasons why he was forced to stop keeping a diary (*Philip Larkin* 370). The implied poet, however, is not interested in the private life of the real poet, or, to put it another way, this poem is not a confession. What the implied poet is interested in is the general question of the relationship between diary keeping (a metonymy of writing) and memory. This is problematized in the first two stanzas:

Stopping the diary  
Was a stun to memory,  
Was a blank starting,

One no longer cicatrized  
By such words, such actions  
As bleakened waking.



One can see four ambivalences corroborating each other in these lines. The grammatical subject (“Stopping the diary”) is immediately followed by two predicates. “Stun to memory” may mean both losing and revitalising memory; “blank starting” contains the possibility of amnesia as well as the blank sheet of thinking, John Locke’s *tabula rasa*. Likewise, “cicatrizated” (a verb defining diary keeping itself in the imagery of the poem) refers to healing a wound (a metaphorically conceived one), but also to the scar that it leaves. Finally, “bleakened waking” is also ambiguous: something disappointing and sobering. Consequently, writing a diary (writing in general) is as vulnerable as stopping the diary.

What is at stake is identity formation. In his book about identity Robert Langbaum quotes David Hume: “[M]emory not only discovers the identity, but also contributes to its production.” Therefore, it is through memory that one can create that “I” which is able to see past and present in continuity, and only through memory are we able to understand “that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person” (*The Mysteries* 27).<sup>2</sup> But keeping a diary on the basis of memory not only constructs but also destructs the personality; this is what the implied poet discerns when he stops the diary:

I wanted them over,  
Hurried to burial  
And looked back on

Like the wars and winters  
Missing behind the windows  
Of an opaque childhood.

Motion interprets the word “them” in the first line of this quotation as a reference to Larkin’s days of distress (*Philip Larkin* 370). The implied poet is curing himself by stopping the diary, which has become self-torment. But he also knows that writing cannot cease forever:

And the empty pages?  
Should they ever be filled  
Let it be with observed

---

<sup>2</sup> In Goffman’s terminology, this is the construction of ego identity, as I mentioned in Chapter 2.4.

Celestial recurrences,  
 The day the flowers come,  
 And when the birds go.

This is a clear paraphrase of Larkin's credo. Writing needs to preserve experience. This axiom *almost* leads the implied poet back to the sanctity of nature. It must be noticed, however, that the closure is introduced by a conditional clause: "Should they ever be filled". In addition, if we interpret the last two lines, we realize that the first refers to spring, the second to autumn; the conjunction "and" suggests that they ought to come together to persuade him to write again. He is not at all sure that memory will find the way back to writing. It is no exaggeration to see this rarely discussed poem as an explanation of the long silence at the end of Larkin's career. Writing *about* remembering (generally: about the structure of time) can be poison as well as pain-killer. Writing *without* remembering means that the mind "will fold into itself", and either forget about the world, or face death as the only important event of the future, as "the only end of age".

### 3.2.5. *Confessions of an Agnostic*

The conclusion is drawn in the last great poem, "Aubade" (CP 208-209). Philip Gardner suggests that there is a long philosophical poem in the centre of each major volume of Larkin: "Church Going" in *The Less Deceived*, "The Whitsun Weddings" in the book with the same title, and two poems, "The Building" and "Show Saturday" in *High Windows*. Such a poem in a fourth volume, had it ever been published, would have been "Aubade" (199). It is remarkable that whereas in the previous poems Larkin constructed personae who established a relationship with a community, here he accepts his isolated position, and makes allusions to collective experience only in the last stanza.

This position shapes the structure of the text. "Aubade" is a confessional poem: the subject is the target of representation. Larkin did not polarize the speaking agent: the description of a non-verbal experience and its contemplation form an indivisible unity, signifying the same feature of time as demonstrated in the second stanza of "Days". It is a Hardy-esque text of psychic pain and *Angst*, as the reader realizes in the first stanza:

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.

Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
 In time the curtain edges will grow light.  
 Till then I see what's really always there:  
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
 Making all thought impossible but how  
 And where and when I shall myself die.  
 Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
 Of dying, and being dead,  
 Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

The short sentences and the end-stopped lines suggest finality, but the represented anxiety forms a tension with it. As Laurence Lerner writes, alluding to the last stanza of "Dockery and Son": "In this poem we move from boredom to fear" ("Larkin's Strategies" 119). The speaker sees himself both from the inside and the outside; this way, he becomes a metonymy of the reader, and this dual perspective determines the temporal structure of the poem. Line 4 sets up the border for the condition of psychic pain and anxiety in time: the speaker knows that it will last only as long as darkness lasts, and will disappear with daylight. Day as a unit of time is, once again, a station on the way towards death. The speaker can achieve catharsis only through unmerciful vivisection:

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse  
 – The good not done, the love not given, time  
 Torn off unused – nor wretchedly because  
 An only life can take so long to climb  
 Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;  
 But at the total emptiness for ever,  
 The sure extinction that we travel to  
 And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
 Not to be anywhere,  
 And soon: nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

Facing nothingness is different here than it was in the earlier poems. The phrase "nothing more true" in the last line of stanza two signifies that beauty is missing, since the two exclude each other in Larkin's poetics. This is why the former images of nothingness, the

clear blue sky or moonshine are not reconstructed here. (The situation would allow both: the persona could look through the window pane.) In the first half of this stanza he refuses to view death from the perspective of life, as a closure of the acts of one's life. The tragic tone is caused by the fact that death constructs its own perspective, which makes it impossible for any other viewpoint to exist. This perspective is that of total darkness, a black hole. Since no light can penetrate into this realm, beauty cannot be created either. Nowhere before did Larkin represent the power of truth without beauty as openly as here. The essence of this truth is that the speaker is horrified of death, and he cannot find any escape or consolation:

This is a special way of being afraid  
 No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
 That vast moth-eaten musical brocade  
 Created to pretend we never die,  
 And specious stuff that says *No rational being*  
*Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing  
 That this is what we fear – no sight, no sound,  
 No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
 Nothing to love or link with,  
 The anaesthetic from which none come round.

The speaker, again, reiterates a *Leitmotif* in Larkin's poetry, but it is stated more overtly than ever before: religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is useless if we want to get rid of our terror of death. But rationalism is of no use either. (As I mentioned earlier, quoting Kubly, rationalization is a form of self-deception in Larkin.) As the italicized statement in stanza three, quoted above, implies: rationalism intends to introduce the perspective of life in a realm that is alien to it, being non-verbal. The paradox is that death is *true*, as the previous stanza claimed: it is a part of reality. It follows from this that humans want to know it, and the poem is about this irresistible impulse. The conclusion of stanza three seems obvious: death can only be known through fear and anxiety, since we can experience nothingness only in a state of mind determined by these. The conventional image of death as the Redeemer is very distant from Larkin; nevertheless, death is personified in the next stanza:

And so it stays just on the edge of vision,  
 A small unfocused blur, a standing chill

That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
 Most things may never happen: this one will,  
 And realization of it rages out  
 In furnace-fear when we are caught without  
 People or drink. Courage is no good:  
 It means not scaring others. Being brave  
 Lets no one off the grave.  
 Death is no different whined at than withstood.

The phrase “furnace-fear” constructs an image that is different from the non-metaphorical and referential language of the previous lines and stanzas: it fulfils the same function of symbolization as the image of the “sand-clouds” in “Dockery and Son” or the “arrow-shower” at the end of “The Whitsun Weddings”. What we see is a condition that the speaker of “Vers de Société” is trying to escape from, and the image of death as a ghost represents the terror of the lonely subject. The perspective of death does not change: seen from this point of view, the courage of facing death is mere pretence.

It is at this point that early daylight as anticipated in the first stanza appears:

Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.  
 It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,  
 Have always known, know that we can't escape,  
 Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.  
 Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring  
 In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring  
 Intricate rented world begins to rouse.  
 The sky is white as clay, with no sun.  
 Work has to be done.  
 Postman like doctors go from house to house.

As light begins to strengthen, the speaker catches a moment when the realms of darkness and daylight overlap: the wardrobe, which is strictly speaking the vehicle of a simile, is also a piece of furniture in the room. Since the description is about a bedroom, the image resists the grammatical structure. The wardrobe is first shown as a part of the setting, and then transformed into the tenor of something abstract: the speaker's terror of death. This fear will

not be dispersed by the active mind of the subject (we have seen that he cannot do that either with religion or with rationalism), but by sunshine. Eduard Vlad sees a strong link between the title and the last stanza: “At dawn, the two ‘lovers’, the speaker and his night-time thoughts and solitude part” (158). According to the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, the literal meaning of the French word *aubade* is ‘dawn song’. For a more detailed definition, the dictionary adds:

The dawn song is found in almost all the world’s early literatures and expresses the regret of parting lovers at daybreak. [...] There is a theory that the *aubade* grew out of the night watchman’s announcement from his tower of the passing of night and the renewal of day. (60, emphasis in the original)

The role that Larkin’s speaker plays is that of the watchman: the text is about “the passing of night and the renewal of day”. Since the same “announcement” could be repeated every day, we are inclined to think of it as endless repetition. But we know it is not: sooner or later the speaker will leave, and death will be triumphant.

However, at this point the realm of night is replaced by that of daylight. Instead of arguments, the implied poet constructs images and impressions. What gains a Pyrrhic victory over darkness and the terror of death is not any abstract concept: it is the vision of daybreak. The everyday routine of life is just as unmerciful and aggressive as death. The heavy, monosyllabic words of the penultimate line suggest the stoic acceptance of the inevitable; this is counterbalanced by the image of postmen as icons of hope.

Consequently, aging means counting the days. The image of work at the beginning and the end of the poem forms a frame around what is more essential: struggling with the absurdity of human fate. Daylight is only what distracts our attention from darkness; the image itself explains why we cannot see what it hides. Therefore, what remains is the fear every night, the experience of the speaker in “Vers de Société” (see Chapter 2.2).

The poem entitled “Love Again” (CP 215) is both a love poem and a poem about the lack of love. In “Aubade” the speaker was confronted with death; here, the protagonist in the same situation (waking at dawn) struggles with his own “pleasure principle”, that is his libido. The early antecedent is poem XXV in *The North Ship* (CP 281), a text in which the target of the speaking subject’s desire is constructed as a divided self. The figure of the friend, as mentioned in lines 10-11 (“Talking in fits and starts / As friends”), is different from the tacitly suggested erotic image in the first seven lines:

Morning has spread again  
 Through every street,  
 And we are strange again;  
 For should we meet  
 How can I tell you that  
 Last night you came  
 Unbidden, in a dream?

Sexual drive constructs erotic fantasy, just like in Robert Graves's poem "The Succubus". The contrast in Larkin's poem is also the same: instincts stand between the speaker and his beloved, while the ideal and ethereal beauty of love is "out of reach". Masturbatory fantasy as an act symbolically representing loneliness is the core of the imagery.

So it is in "Love Again", but in a different register. While "Aubade" is a record of accepting everyday horror, this poem puts an end to the career of a writer by drawing the conclusion. The nearly pornographic style is not self-representation or expression; it is an image of social identity as Goffman defines it (see Chapter 2.5). Larkin constructs a vision of social expectation and his failure to live up to it:

Someone else feeling her breasts and cunt,  
 Someone else drowned in the lash-wide stare,  
 And me supposed to be ignorant,  
 Or find it funny, or not to care,  
 Even . . . but why put it into words?  
 Isolate rather this element

That spreads through other lives like tree  
 And sways them on in a sort of sense  
 And say why it never worked for me.

As in a number of earlier poems, the experience of psychic pain (becoming almost physical) is represented in referential language. Space and time shape the dimensions of the poem: the day behind and the day ahead keep the persona imprisoned the same way as the walls of his

bedroom do. His question is why erotic love did not bring happiness to him. He attempts to give an answer in the last three lines:

Something to do with violence  
A long way back, and wrong rewards,  
And arrogant eternity.

In Andrew Motion's reading, the three reasons are the frustration that he experienced in his parents' house as a child, the antagonism between desires and reality, and the imperative of art against life (*Philip Larkin* 477). Thus, "Love Again" is a swan song not only because of what it says in the closure, but also because of the way it creates a link with the first mature poem of the Larkin canon, "Waiting for Breakfast", in which the speaker chose the muse instead of a flesh-and-blood woman (the allegory of life in terms of social identity).

Aging is coming to an end, the poem suggests. The time span measured for the poet will be closed by the moment of dying, which he cannot see any more clearly than time itself. All he can see is units of time and the painful process of aging itself, which become a figure of temporality in the poems.



### 3.3. Time as Space

The central motif of Larkin's first mature collection of poems, *The Less Deceived*, is the relationship between experience, text and meaning in a variety of contexts. This is what Larkin starts with and returns to in this book, which was published in the same year as the "Statement" (1955). The poems (and also the volume as a coherent text) provide ample evidence that although Larkin thought of his responsibility to experience as a guiding principle, he also doubted that it could serve as an organizing and constructive force in poetry. Facing and representing this paradox played a central role in the unexpected success of *The Less Deceived*.

In this volume the most important experience to be transferred into the verbal form of poetry is the passing of time. In some of the central poems he transformed the experience of time into metaphors of space, a method he kept on using in his later poetry.<sup>1</sup> This is sometimes analogous with the representation of time units, with the difference that when time is envisioned as space, it is frequently indivisible. Such poems are typically those in which Larkin, overtly or covertly, applies the technique of photography. In some other cases (most spectacularly in the poems about train journeys) visible continuity in space is constructed as a metaphor of time.

#### 3.3.1. Photography and the Past

The opening poem of *The Less Deceived* is "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" (CP 71-72). It is easy to find this position symbolic: this is the first significant volume of the central figure of the Movement, which has itself been characterized as "creative photography" (Kuby 154). On the other hand, Andrew Motion has pointed out Larkin's ambivalent attitude: although this poem can really be read as a prototype of Movement verse, it also alludes to its limits (*Philip Larkin*. Contemporary Writers ser. 82-84). This duality can particularly be seen in these lines:

---

<sup>1</sup> This method strengthened the symbolism of some parts of the poems. In "The Rhetoric of Temporality" Paul de Man writes that in a symbol (in contrast with allegories) the connection between reality and its representation is spatial rather than temporal. Andrew Motion draws attention to the typically symbolic function of the image of "sand-clouds" in "Dockery and Son", an image that has "no precise connection with the poem's dominant pattern of images". Motion adds that "they fleetingly fulfil the function that Yeats expected of symbolism" (*Philip Larkin*. Contemporary Writers ser. 14). As I mentioned previously, a further example of the same symbolism is the image in the last two lines of "The Whitsun Weddings".

But O, photography! as no art is,  
Faithful and disappointing!

This is what Movement poetry can also become: “faithful” but “disappointing”, which latter suggests something discouraging and deceptive at the same time. It will be noticed that the reference to “disappointment” is both to the experience represented by photography and the photos themselves (also as metonymies of art).

The text is a symbolic love poem; however, its symbolism is concealed by the realism of descriptive details, the mimetic level of the text and its referential language. Larkin wrote it to Winifred Arnott, the woman he was in love with in Belfast, and if one reads it in the context of his letters to her, it is also the basic text of a long discourse of love.<sup>2</sup> Its sexual symbols are overt: the woman offers her own self by letting him have the album (“At last you yielded up the album”); the male speaker first wants to satisfy his eyes (“My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose”); then, jealously, he separates her from his rivals (“Not quite your class, I’d say, dear, on the whole”). The photographs he is watching make him believe (either by convincing him or deceiving him) that the experience of possessing the woman is a real one:

That this is a real girl in a real place,

In every sense empirically true!

Larkin’s two major values meet. Beauty has become true, not unlike in Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and, more significantly, in “The Eve of St. Agnes” (a poem that Larkin found particularly interesting), where sexual intercourse signifies beauty transformed into truth.

But before the reader of this poem could be enchanted by the charm of symbolic love-making, s/he has to realize that this is only one half of what could be called the core of the text. Its literal meaning, on the other hand, is that the male desire represented here is satisfied *only* symbolically, *only* in the speaker’s imagination. The artistic value of the poem is based upon the tension between these two latent meanings. This is corroborated by another duality: that between personality and impersonality, the intricate mask technique of the text. The mask

---

<sup>2</sup> It would be out place here to enter the debate as to whether private letters should be treated as parts of a writer’s life work. My position is this: once they have been published we cannot ignore them.

is not only that of a jealous person: it is also that of the learned man of letters. Intertextuality shapes the meaning.

The poem recalls Cecil Day Lewis's "The Album" both in its title and through its subject matter. Larkin's pleasure and *Schadenfreude* (which he felt on learning that somebody thought his poem superior to Day Lewis's) expressed in a letter to Winifred (*SL* 300) provides evidence that he knew his older fellow-poet's work. As the situation in the two poems is basically the same, Larkin's text can also be read as a provocative and witty response to the previous one. In Day Lewis the representation of the everyday situation is only a starting point to achieve the surrealism of the closing stanza, where the possession of the woman by the man is complete; his desire is fulfilled, since he is offered even her past, her whole personal history:

I close the book,  
But the past slides out of its leaves to haunt me  
And it seems, wherever I look,  
Phantoms of irreclaimable happiness taunt me.

Then I see her, petalled in new-blown hours,  
Beside me – 'All you love most there  
Has blossomed again,' she murmurs, 'all that you missed there  
Has grown to be yours.  
(*Poems of C. Day Lewis* 125)

The present has grown out of the past organically. The "yielding" in the last line of Day Lewis's poem becomes a symbolic beginning in Larkin: "At last you yielded up the album". But the closure of the poem, in poignant contrast with Day Lewis's, suggests that no personal past can be possessed by another subject:

So I am left  
.....  
... to condense,

In short, a past that no one now can share,  
No matter whose your future; calm and dry,

It holds you like a heaven, and you lie  
 Unvariably lovely there,  
 Smaller and clearer as the years go by.

In poetry there is only one way for a man to completely contain a female subject: by constructing her as a figure and making her speak. (The phrasing “making her speak”, of course, is imprecise: in most cases it is arguably the implied poet who “speaks” through the mask of the persona.) It is no accident that the second poem of *The Less Deceived* is “Wedding Wind”. The poem representing the passing of time in the artificial spaces created by photography is followed by a text constructing both the idyll of a static space and the feeling of terror. Arranging some of the poems in pairs in a book of poetry is a frequent editing principle, since in this way the two texts, read together, can form further contingencies of meaning. Yeats used this device frequently: some “pairs” of poems complementing each other (and also forming contrasts) are “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” and “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, or “The Second Coming” and “A Prayer for my Daughter” in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. Larkin’s “Lines...” and “Wedding Wind” are also complementary pieces. The speaker in the former is a man, while the latter constructs a female voice; from the point of view of the implied poet the first is based on desire, the second on symbolic possession. Beauty becoming truth proves to be illusion (self-deception) in “Lines...”; in “Wedding Wind”, the truth in the situation is discovered by a female voice.

Carol Ann Duffy’s “Before You Were Mine” represents this voice when she re-writes the two male poets’ (Day Lewis’s and Larkin’s) texts:

The decade ahead of my loud, possessive yell was the best  
 one, eh?

I remember my hands in those high-heeled red shoes, relics,  
 and now your ghost clatters towards me over George Square  
 till I see you, clear as scent, under the tree,  
 with its lights, and whose small bites on your neck,  
 sweetheart?

*Cha cha cha!* You’d teach me the steps on the way home from  
 Mass,

stamping stars from the wrong pavement. Even then  
 I wanted the bold girl winking in Portobello, somewhere  
 in Scotland, before I was born. That glamorous love lasts  
 where you sparkle and waltz and laugh before you were  
 mine.

(*Mean Time* 13)

As I wrote in Chapter 2.2, in the closure of his poem Larkin uses an idiom that is normally used in reference to the dead, demonstrating that writing (a temporal event) is only possible through metaphors of death. Larkin's young lady is "Smaller and clearer" as time is passing; Duffy's woman is "clear as scent". Photography stops time and transforms the moment either into beauty or into truth. Duffy lets her protagonist in the picture (dead now) dance and laugh, but this dynamism is still closed into the moment. The only way to preserve an experience from the past is by re-constructing it as a photograph; this is how Duffy's text reads Larkin's.

Whereas in "Lines..." the speaker creates a vision of another person's past, the speaker in "I Remember, I Remember" (CP 81-82) is in search of his own personal past, his childhood self. The experience represented in the poem comes all of a sudden:

Coming up England by a different line  
 For once, early in the cold new year,  
 We stopped, and, watching men with number-plates  
 Sprint down the platform to familiar gates,  
 'Why, Coventry!' I exclaimed. 'I was born here.'

As can be seen in the first line, the character in the poem has chosen an unusual route, and, completely unexpectedly for him, the train calls at his birth-place, Coventry. Experience comes with an elemental power; this is signified in a threefold way by the instinctive gesture with which the speaker leans out of the window, the dialect word ("squinnied"), and the strenuous effort to possess the place as his own again, even though only for a minute:

I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign  
 That this was still the town that had been 'mine'  
 So long, but found I wasn't even clear  
 Which side was which.

The train, however, leaves the station, and this separates the experience from its later contemplation:

. . . A whistle went:  
Things moved. I sat back, staring at my boots.

These lines introduce the act of remembering, and at this point the poem becomes one of Larkin's most ironic and parodistic pieces: it holds up a distorting mirror to nostalgic poems recalling the poet's childhood.<sup>3</sup> "Things moved", in two senses: the train departs, and the target of remembering also moves away from the thinking and speaking subject. Hugh Underhill suggests that the poem is about disillusionment and the refusal to deceive oneself:

Nostalgia literally means, after all, a longing to return home, and it is abundantly clear from 'I Remember, I Remember', or the poem 'Home is so Sad', that Larkin experiences no such longing. All attempts to keep the past alive, every 'Reference Back', 'link us to our losses' in a way he finds unbearable, and foster the delusion that things might have been other than they are, that there might really have been a choice of departures. (187)

All clichés appear in a negative form, beginning with the bitter cynicism of the phrase "my childhood was unspent":

Our garden first: where I did not invent  
Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits,  
And wasn't spoken to by an old hat.

The reader might wonder why the implied poet is speaking about the lack of experience rather than experience itself. There is an increasing feeling that this is an "anti-poem", until we reach the last line:

'You look as if you wished the place in Hell,'

---

<sup>3</sup> More concretely, it is a parody of Thomas Hood's once popular poem with the same title.

My friend said, 'judging from your face.' 'Oh well,  
I suppose it's not the place's fault,' I said.

'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.'

Although the last line is a puzzling aphorism, and is therefore open to a number of readings, one possible interpretation is this: the absence of experience is also an experience, and a poem can also be born out of that.

"I Remember, I Remember" is a dramatic lyric in which the poet distances his confession and self-portrait by constructing a dramatic situation. The structure that I have pointed out in "Coming" (Chapter 2.4) and "Church Going" (Chapter 2.6), the distinction between an experience and its elaboration, can also be observed here. Since the persona refuses to deceive himself with the illusion of nostalgia, what he remembers is absence. This is transferred into the poem, where the railway line represents the merciless continuity of time. But the future is also nothingness, personal extinction. The place of birth is left behind, signifying the narrow limits of human choices, like the poster in "Sunny Prestatyn". Matt Simpson refers to the similarity between the two poems: "Prestatyn is a direction untaken, an unfulfilled promise (like the promises in 'I Remember, I Remember's unspent childhood); it is also a sunny image set in stark contrast to the functional dreariness of the railway station it is urging to get away from" (177). The poster in "Sunny Prestatyn" is as deceptive as the nostalgia evoked by catching sight of our birthplace. Images of childhood are metaphors of time, but also places of delusion.

*The Whitsun Weddings* shows in even sharper focus the problem of temporal and spatial relations; one of the central themes is distance, which the persona attempts to bridge. Andrew Swarbrick comments: "After the self-absorption of *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* expresses a yearning for the self's absorption in otherness" (121). The novelty of the new volume can clearly be seen in a comparison between the closing poem of *The Less Deceived*, "At Grass" (CP 29-30), and the opening text of *The Whitsun Weddings*, "Here" (CP 136-37).

3.3.2. *There and Here*

“At Grass” was based on a documentary film about retired racehorses. Although there is no clear indication in the text that the speaker is watching a film, it is easy to see Larkin’s camera technique in stanza 1, as he approaches the horses gradually, and then shows them one by one. Apart from imitating the movement of a camera and following in the wake of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century landscape poetry, this stanza is also self-reflective: the way the poet is using experience to form a text is also a part of the poem. The implied poet is detached from the horses, but he makes efforts to bridge the gap by finding a meaning in the experience. A partial failure of these efforts is suggested by the last line of stanza 1, where a racehorse “stands anonymous”.

The speaker wants to find the lost names of the creatures he is describing. To achieve this he constructs images of the past, and thus the text becomes nostalgic. The question for him is whether he can understand the experience of seeing the horses, or, to put it another way: is he able to communicate with these animals? He asks if they think of what he himself has in mind: “Do memories plague their ears like flies? / They shake their heads” (lines 19-20). This is a characteristically Larkinesque pun: the horses shake their heads not only because of the flies mentioned in the vehicle of the simile, but also as a reply to the speaker’s question. The meaning of the horses is a past experience, but now they live in a non-verbal world, without the names they used to have. The vision that it creates is not that of unhappiness, it is rather an image of non-human idyll. The implied poet cannot find the names, he can only guess the essence of the experience represented in the text (“*seeming* to look on”, “gallop for what *must* be joy”), and suggests that he can only write about the absence, rather than the presence of something. This missing “something” in this particular poem is the communication between humans and animals.

The speaker of “Here” reveals the same position as the persona of “At Grass”: that of the passive observer. Both follow the convention of classic landscape poetry: “At Grass” starts with a distant view to end with close-ups representing the intimacy that the speaker discerns in the community of retired race horses; “Here” first goes in the opposite order, then arrives in a place of absence. (The description is that of Hull, as the phrase “slave museum” suggests in line 20, with its reference to the museum erected to commemorate the political fight of William Wilberforce.) The differences between the two poems are telling. Whereas in “At Grass” the implied poet tries to bridge the distance from the position of a person watching a film, the speaker of “Here” is a traveller who explores the city and notices minor details. He



never becomes a part of the crowd, but seems to know it as thoroughly as he knows the buildings. The middle part of the poem is based on juxtaposition; more accurately, on an inventory whose elements form a harmonious whole:

A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling  
Where only salesmen and relations come  
Within a terminate and fishy-smelling  
Pastoral of ships up streets, the slave museum,  
Tattoo-shops, consulates, grim head-scarfed wives;

As the title suggests, this is a poem of *Dasein*, but the word “here” refers to something that the speaker encounters on leaving the city:

And past the poppies bluish neutral distance  
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach  
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:  
Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

The image of nothingness appears in the same situation as it does in other poems where the persona looks out of the window: “Wants”, “High Windows” and “Sad Steps”. There exists another world in Larkin’s “universe”, which (as Andrew Motion puts it) is “both ‘Here’ and nowhere, and attainable only in imagination, not in fact” (*Philip Larkin. Contemporary Writers* ser. 80). Depicting the landscape becomes meaningful as the speaker leaves the world with numerous details behind to arrive in another world where details do not exist. This transgression is essentially the same as the sudden shift between two spheres in “Days”. In that poem the long series of time units is contrasted with the indivisibility of time in death; in “Here”, the journey in space takes the speaker to a homogeneous place. In the last sentence of the poem the word “here” is an adverb of place, but it takes the position of the grammatical subject. A literal meaning can be constructed as ‘at the end of my journey I find a place beyond the constraints of culture’. Read as a definition (interpreting “here” as a subject), a possible meaning is: ‘being here (*Dasein*) is something undifferentiated and unconstrained, but the freedom of this existence is beyond our reach’. Once again, the richest signification is constructed by the tension between these two possible meanings. We cannot break out of culture: “unfenced existence” is as “untalkative” as the priest and the doctor are in “Days”.

Larkin regarded the transgression of the border between two worlds as the essence of the poem; also as a sequel to the title poem of *The North Ship*. He enlarged on this in a letter to Robert Conquest: “No one much seems to have noticed it, though it is to my mind in direct linear succession to *The North Ship*—I mean just pushing on into a bloodier and bloodier area” (*SL* 335). In the early poem three ships set out. Two of them return, but the third has the kind of circuitous journey that Coleridge’s ancient mariner undergoes:

The northern sky rose high and black  
Over the proud unfruitful sea,  
East and west the ships came back  
Happily or unhappily;

But the third went wide and far  
Into an unforgiving sea  
Under a fire-spilling star,  
And it was rigged for a long journey.  
(*CP* 302)

The plot of an untold ballad shines through the description of the ships. In “Here”, however, there is no narrative: spatiality predominates, and the speaker does not become a narrator. Temporality is only indicated by spatial advance. The implied poet is both a part of the city and an outsider. Tom Paulin’s suggestion that the speaker is a “prophet” (174) is exaggerated. Larkin’s persona cannot become a prophet any more than Eliot’s Prufrock can. He does not know his own narrative, or is unable to tell his story, or perhaps does not want to talk about it. He only sees and represents the contrast between the details of something and the indivisibility of nothingness. Consequently, there develops no dramatic situation and no communication with the target of representation. The implied poet is attracted to the otherness of the city (as shown in the delight caused by observing the details), but keeps his position as an outsider.

### 3.3.3. *Time, Space and Rituals*

This is only partly true of the speaker in “The Whitsun Weddings” (CP 114-116), a poem in which the real protagonist is time. On the mimetic level of content, it is about structuring time in the everyday sense: setting and learning about train departure times, the duration of the journey and the expected time of arrival. The train journey is also a part of the non-adventurous routine that we see in a number of Larkin’s major poems. Hugh Underhill writes: “[F]or Larkin the ritual never-new recurrences of quotidian life, which have the power, however precarious, to insulate us protectively from the ravages of past and future, represent the only bearable refuge” (184). “The Whitsun Weddings” is an exception; although it is also deeply rooted in everyday, middle-class existence, the vision of intimacy and pleasure is not counterbalanced by that of nothingness.

Whitsun (Pentecost), it should be noted, is a traditional occasion for weddings in Britain. After a while the speaker of the poem realizes that newly wed couples take the train at every station. As opposed to “Here”, where the focus on the sight was sharp from the beginning and the speaker remained in the background, in this poem the “I” is first concerned with his journey, and the sight arrives as something unintended. David Timms observes that the point of view is that of a moving person: cars are “blinding windscreens”, hothouses appear as flashes, hedges are dipping and rising (118). This suggests the relativity of the observer’s position in a physical and philosophical sense. The speaker perceives how space creates time as the fourth dimension of reality.<sup>4</sup>

This experience determines the second level of the poem: the speaker finds a point in space (signified by the railway lines) and time (signified by the duration of the journey) where the notion of happiness appears in a concentrated form, in the short spell of a few minutes and in the narrow space of some railway carriages:

Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast  
Long shadows over major roads, and for  
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem

Just enough to settle hats and say  
*I nearly died,*

---

<sup>4</sup> Gavin Ewart re-constructed this notion of space and time in his pastiche “The Larkin Automatic Car Wash” (254-256).

A dozen marriages got under way.

In contrast with the typical structure of dramatic lyrics (seen, for example, in “Church Going”, “Coming”, “I Remember, I Remember”, or “High Windows”), here the perception of experience and its later contemplation are not sharply separated; moreover, the primary perception of the experience itself is only revealed as the outcome of a slow and gradual process of understanding:

At first, I didn't notice what a noise  
 The weddings made  
 Each station that we stopped at. . .  
 .....  
 They watched the landscape, sitting side by side  
 – An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,  
 And someone running up to bowl – and none  
 Thought of the others they would never meet  
 Or how their lives would all contain this hour.  
 I thought of London spread out in the sun,

The aspect of the poem is down-to-earth: not for a moment can the reader forget that the situation being related is the train journey itself. An experience without a conflict becomes predominant here; as a result, the perspective of the poem is not tragic, which is reinforced by the technique which makes the transition between the experience and its contemplation smooth<sup>5</sup>. Time is linked with the notion of happiness instead of the consciousness of death, even though it does not mean the happiness of the speaker or the implied poet. Therefore, this poem can be read as a counterpart of “Days”. On the other hand, it is characterized by the same desire for totality as the protagonist of “Church Going”: a desire to see birth, marriage and death in unity. The speaker of “The Whitsun Weddings” is susceptible to the described experience because he feels the increase in the intensity of life, even if it is other people's lives. Janice Rossen's analysis seems to support this interpretation:

---

<sup>5</sup> “Smooth” also in the sense that Donald Davie refers to when discussing the use of the word in *Purity of Diction*, as a synonym of “easy” and an antonym of “strong” in the critical discourse of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (171-177).

[T]he balance between participation and separation, which characterise train travel, might be what Larkin enjoys; on a train, at least, he can be temporarily linked with others, without having to be a part of the crowd himself, and without having actually to attend the weddings or stand on the station platforms. (58-59)

John Wain points out another aspect of the persona's behaviour:

In a sense the poet's involvement is greater than theirs; he sees and understands just what it is that each participant feels, and then puts them together to form one complex experience, felt in its directness by no one, yet present in the atmosphere and available to that imaginative contemplation that makes "art". (175)

Lolette Kuby's reading supports Wain's view. The poem reflects a dual metamorphosis: that of the young couples, who change from children to parents, and that of the poet, who changes from a passive observer to a creator by making a poem out of the experience. Thus, the attitude of preserving values turns up at two levels of the poem (121). Rossen's, Wain's and Kuby's analyses tacitly suggest that the experience itself is something constructed, and I find this very important. However, in my reading it is not the act of writing a poem that is in the centre of this text but the event itself, spatial relations becoming temporal relations, and the process during which mere sight changes into an experience (constructed but non-verbal). The essence of this experience is that the implied poet meets the vitality of life in the form of an epiphany, but he remains within everyday existence. Consequently, experience is the primary value, while any later contemplation is of secondary relevance. The simulation of reality in the first seventy-eight lines of the poem makes the symbolic epiphany of the last two possible; this is how Larkin is able to create a link with Eliot's modernism (see Chapter 2.1).

Such symbolic (and spatial) tropes in Larkin represent his desire to transcend the world of self-deception. While "The Whitsun Weddings" leads the implied poet out of the "order" constructed by illusion and rationalization, two other poems in the same volume, "The Large Cool Store" and "Sunny Prestatyn" anatomize delusion in a bitterly satirical voice. Both show the vanity of trying to escape from time.

"The Large Cool Store" (CP 135) is a variation on the theme of recreating the illusion of living in Paradise. As opposed to the sympathetic representation of the same theme in "MCMXIV" (see Chapter 3.1), the speaker of this poem carefully avoids all signs of nostalgia. It is well known that shopping centres form autonomous worlds within consumer

societies. These are open to a number of interpretations: an illusion of being in the centre of the universe, a distorted form of religion (Hankiss 78-79), a substitution for drugs, an institution for cunningly exploiting the masses, and so forth. All these suggest that, on the one hand, large department stores separate themselves from the outside world consciously and spectacularly; on the other hand, they link the illusion of heavenly affluence with infantilizing their customers. The poem describes this:

The large cool store selling cheap clothes  
 Set out in simple sizes plainly  
 (Knitwear, Summer Casuals, Hose,  
 In browns and grey, maroon and navy)  
 Conjures the weekday world of those

Who leave at dawn low terraced houses  
 Timed for factory, yard and site.

Among the colourful dresses and clothes the speaker notices a dream world within the dream world: the realm of women's underwear, designed to be exciting. However, the large store and the everyday existence of its costumers are infinitely far from each other:

To suppose  
 They share that world, to think their sort is  
 Matched by something in it, shows

How separate and unearthly love is,  
 Or women are, or what they do,  
 Or in our young unreal wishes  
 Seem to be: synthetic, new,  
 And natureless in ecstasies.

The image of distance creates further meanings. Janice Rossen suggests that through the eyes of the male speaker, women live in an unreachable, moreover, ethereal world (76). This level of the poem links it with Larkin's juvenile lesbian texts. Lesbian fantasies are replaced by the image of lingerie in this poem, but the notion of a place "out of reach" is the same. Women

are also separated from the persona by something “synthetic, new, / And natureless”. But there exists another distance: that between women and their desire and between their bodies and the dresses offered to them. The possibility of bridging these distances is mere hypothesis, and the speaker draws the conclusion: love is missing from *this* world, and the *alternative* world is false, no more than deception.

A brief comparison with Alan Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California” demonstrates an important feature of Larkin’s poetics. Both poets feel strangers in the shopping centre that has been designed as the most important place in a customers’ culture. But the reactions are different: whereas Ginsberg rebels against this world, Larkin expresses his inability to change it. Rebellion would endanger the experience before it is transferred into the poem. Consequently, what seems to be inactivity or weakness is actually a source of creative energy.

“Sunny Prestatyn” (CP 149) is also about the dream world of commerce, projected into the picture in a seductive advertisement. The italicized quotation dramatizes the situation of the persona by making the *other speaker* talk to him from a virtual reality:

*Come to Sunny Prestatyn*  
 Laughed the girl in the poster,  
 Kneeling up on the sand  
 In tautened white satin.

The narrative of the poem is about the slow devastation of the poster. The relationship between the “dream girl” and the real men (or adolescent boys) is determined by aggressive sexuality. Vandalism in this context becomes wish fulfilment, the ritual and symbolic raping of the girl, who belongs to a different world:

Huge tits and a fissured crotch  
 Were scored well in, and the space  
 Between her legs held scrawls  
 That set her fairly astride  
 A tuberos cock and balls

Autographed *Titch Thomas*, while  
 Someone has used a knife  
 Or something to stub right through

The moustached lips of her smile.

The girl in the picture, an incarnation of innocence and defencelessness in a two-dimensional world, is killed in reality: she is the victim of sex murder. She was out of place in this world; therefore, somebody gave her a finishing stroke:

She was too good for this life.

Very soon, a great transverse tear

Left only a hand and some blue.

Now *Fight Cancer* is there.

The mutilated body of the girl reveals the same “Mallarméan *Azure*” (Bayley 99) that we have seen in “High Windows” (see Chapter 3.2), but eventually it is replaced by a synecdoche of death. The implied poet sees not only the unreachable and ethereal world of women in the poster (Rossen 76), and the poem does not merely say that material reality can only destroy the values of transcendence. Larkin suggests that another reality must exist *somewhere*, but we can make contact with it only through its absence. The railway lines from the station will not take us to that world: they only create an illusion that we can understand time. The contrast between a realistic (mimetic) narrative and the allusion to the symbolic value of blue remains poignant, since no experience can be transferred from one sphere to the other.

### 3.3.4. *Dickens and Son*

This duality of mimesis (through simulation) and symbolism (manifest in image-making) is a basic feature of “Dockery and Son” (CP 152-53), too. The title suggests that Dickens’s major novel, *Dombey and Son* is a subtext; the two texts read each other in a stimulating way. Both for Dickens and Larkin the stress seems to fall on the word “and” in the title, since Dombey and Dockery, as well as their sons, are realistically drawn characters, that is simulations of flesh-and-blood individuals. It is the link between them that is at stake: *and* as a hypothetical entity is elusive. To put it another way, the question is whether the father can be continued in the son, whether a firm as an economic unit can be continued and finally, at the most general level, whether the continuity of the individual outside him/herself is possible at all.



In Larkin's poetics, the problem of the continuity of time and space is closely linked with that of biological and social continuity (see the discussion of "This Be The Verse" in Chapter 3.1). In 1943 he wrote in a letter:

[W]itnessing a "quarrel" between my parents and experiencing the terrible neutralizing effect such a scene has on me I realised that I contain both of them, and that this is the cause of my inertia, for in me they are incessantly opposed. I was so pleased with the idea I burst out laughing. [...] It intrigues me to know that a thirty-years [sic] struggle is being continued in me, and in my sister too. (Letter 56)

Larkin's laughter is at the expense of his position as a son and the fact that this very position assumes a metonymic function, as it signifies his own "inertia", a law of nature adopted by society. Paradoxically, he "contains" both his parents, but (or therefore) he is "inert".

The poem "Dockery and Son" was written twenty years after this letter, in 1963. By that time Larkin had also selected his symbolic fathers and, as a sign of his artistic "inertia", intertextuality became a part of his poetics. "Dockery and Son" is symptomatic. It was as early as in 1940 that Larkin admitted: "I could no more write like Dickens did than I could fly" (Letter 10); in 1949 he wrote about Dickens as a great, although ambivalent, example of artistic integrity:

[G]reat men have great energy, whether at generalship or industry or painting: they are those lucky beings in whom a horny sheath of egoism protects their energy, not allowing it to be dissipated or turned against itself. How else can one reconcile Dickens's lachrymose demoniacal writings with his cold unfeeling treatment of his wife and family? (Letter 186)

Besides Auden, Yeats, Hardy and D. H. Lawrence (to mention only the most important of his masters), Dickens, too, proved to be a great example of artistic integrity (meaning a pattern of choosing art instead of "private life"), also as a creator of "universes" in his novels. An underlying question of Larkin's intertextuality is whether this father figure was to be continued.

If one reads the phrase *Dombey/Dockery and Son*, one will most likely think both of a family and a firm, and, more than that, these two will be conceived of as two inseparably integrated units. But the point in Dickens's novel is that the two are not integrated (Andrews

121). This questions the significance of *and*: the continuity of a full circle is broken. Consequently, as J. Hillis Miller has pointed out:

The central problem of *Dombey and Son*, a problem faced by all the characters, is how to break through the barriers separating one from the world and one from other people. For here what is outside each person is alien and unfriendly; the protagonists differ from the other characters only in the completeness of their isolation. (Ford and Lane 369)

Dickens, of course, made an attempt to make the circle full again, that is to say, to re-integrate family and firm, father and son, nature and society. Lost values are to be regained in Dickens's world; the most obvious reason why *Dombey and Son* could become a subtext for Larkin is its profound conservatism. For Dickens, the only way to create values is through restoration: this is why Florence (Dombey's daughter) feels obliged to keep her dead brother alive in her memory as well as to find and employ her former housemaid again. Continuity is restored; the permanence signified by the word *and*, and broken by Dombey against his own will, has become a protagonist again. Of course, it much depends on the reader to decide whether this continuity is interpreted as illusory or "real".

More concretely, there are two motifs that link Dickens's novel and Larkin's poem together: the general problem of death (as the discontinuity of human life) and the image of the railway (as a human attempt to make space continuous, but also to break its continuity).

It goes without saying that railways carry different meanings for a mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century novelist and a mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century poet. In *Dombey and Son* trains penetrate into a world of continuity as a destructive force. Harland S. Nelson explains: "[W]hen Dickens thinks of railroads, before anything else he sees smashed houses and blocked streets, and feels time and place swirl" (43). In "Dockery and Son" railway lines belong to a well-established world order. To put it somewhat simplistically: for Dickens, railway lines originate in the present and go into the unknown future whereas for Larkin, trains represent the past and stop in the present. As I pointed out previously, in "The Whitsun Weddings" the train journey signifies a social ritual (its destination being a Yeatsian symbol that refers to something eternally present), and in "I Remember, I Remember" the narrated part of the journey starts at the speaker's birthplace and terminates in the limitless possibility of nothingness.

In “Dockery and Son” the train journey also takes the persona into nothingness, and this is clearly anticipated by Dickens’s novel. These are the initial and final sentences of the passage describing Dombey’s train journey that he goes on after his young son’s death:

He found no pleasure or relief in the journey. [...] The very speed at which the train was whirled along mocked the swift course of the young life that had been borne away so steadily and so inexorably to its foredoomed end. The power that forced itself upon its iron way—its own—defiant of all paths and roads, piercing through the heart of every obstacle, and dragging living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind it, was a type of the triumphant monster, Death! [...] As Mr Dombey looks out of his carriage window, it is never in his thoughts that the monster who has brought him there has let the light of day in on these things: not made or caused them. It was the journey’s fitting end and might have been the end of everything; it was so ruinous and dreary. (Dickens 249, 251)

This passage plays a central role in the structure and symbolism of the novel, as it forms a poignant contrast between two opposite forces. Badri Raina’s analysis is appropriate:

[O]ne can see what a finely sustained dual—and opposed—movement Dickens carries through the whole novel: one, the linear movement of positivist history captured centrally in the symbol of the railroad that rushes mindlessly on; and the other, a reverse movement of introspection in which, as Dombey wishes to rush forward, he is constantly obliged to go backwards to make an assessment of scenes and situations that he must understand in order to come to a reliable comprehension of his total reality. (75)

Both of these techniques and their contrast as a basic constituent of the poem can be discerned in Larkin. The persona is carried forward by a train (almost too obviously a symbol of the monotony of life), while he can get rid of his “inertia” only by regressing into the past. Both Dombey and Larkin’s speaker want to understand the significance of the word *and*, they want to grasp continuity in time and space. But time is beyond human comprehension: it leads to death, a realm unknown to us. The only way to approximate the essence of time is by imagining it in spatial relations; this is the main reason why the image of the railway is so important both for Dickens and Larkin.

Larkin makes desperate efforts to regain Dickens's world, but he has to realize that he is unable to. He cannot occupy Dickens's position, only his creature's: Dombey's. The name "Dockery" is a miserably hilarious version of the robust "Dombey", combined with a nonsensical word in a nursery rhyme:

Hickory, dickory, dock,  
 The mouse ran up the clock.  
     The clock struck one,  
  
     The mouse ran down,  
 Hickory, dickory, dock.  
 (Opie 206)

The figure of Dockery can be linked with this count-out because he is a victim of time, just like the mouse trying to escape from the clock. Although the speaker of "Dockery and Son" first thinks that he and Dockery are absolutely different, he still has to conclude that essentially they are the same: both are adult men captured by time. Instead of enriching his life by having a family, Dockery's life is "diluted"; but since Dockery's son is matched by "nothing" in the speaker's life, they are still each other's doubles.<sup>6</sup> Dockery's conventional way of life, his fathering a son, may seem a virtue, but as one of Dickens's characters says when characterizing Dombey, "vices are sometimes only virtues carried to excess!" (716)

There is no sharp dividing line, therefore, between vice and virtue. Dombey's hatred of sexuality results in a discourse betraying his perversity. The opening sentence of *Dombey and Son* reads as free indirect speech showing how Dombey's unconscious breaks through his social ambition and creates cannibalistic fantasies:

Dombey sat in the corner of the darkened room in the great armchair by the bedside, and Son lay tucked up warm in a little basket bedstead, carefully disposed on a low settee immediately in front of the fire and close to it, as if his constitution were

---

<sup>6</sup> In a book review Tony Pinsky comments on the sentence "To have no son, no wife, / No house or land still seemed quite natural" (stanza four, lines 1-2): "But they only *seem* natural because they belong to an entire European tradition, which preceded and was superseded by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud; one that had long celebrated freedom and social noninvolvement, situating transcendental truth outside history, community, sexuality. In this sense, Larkin's exquisite poetic miniatures belong to the grand European project of *modernity*" (214, emphases in the original). The word *seem* also suggests that behind the surface (the "beauty" of Dockery's family life) the two lives are essentially the same (and represent "truth").

analogous to that of a muffin, and it was essential to toast him brown while he was very new. (Dickens 5)

Symbolically, what later happens in the novel is that Paul is killed and eaten by his father, which also causes the father's own symbolic death. In Robert Clerk's analysis:

[T]he death of Paul is the death of the father's procreative ability, a death that may be seen as unconsciously desired when we consider Dombey's universal hatred of sexuality. [...] Dombey's denial of Paul's difference can [...] be seen to be both a denial of his sexuality and a refusal of capitalism's constant need to expand and defer itself. (Hollington 35)

Still, as J. Hillis Miller writes, "[t]his is the last of Dickens's novels in which the establishment of satisfactory relations with one's parents can be an escape from isolation" (Ford and Lane 371). Of course, it cannot in *Larkin*. As has been pointed out, Dickens's novel echoes Wordsworth's line: "The Child is father of the Man" (Andrews 131). When Larkin refuses the possibility of building an identity through fathering a child, he also refuses this romantic concept of the infant as an innocent witness of Heaven. We cannot regain Paradise through combining the illusory purity of childhood with the philosophy of old age (an idea of disillusionment also demonstrated in "Faith Healing"). Refusing the Wordsworthian notion of the child as an ultimate source of knowledge was a fundamental part of Larkin's credo. In a letter in 1945 he wrote:

Visions are what one lives by. Wordsworth, you know, had visions, but they were mostly connected with childhood, and apparently died away as he grew older. This should not be. The life of an artist should be a continual polishing of that inner lens which perceives these visions; as he grows older it should become clearer and clearer. (Letter 111)

In reference to identity creation I deliberately wrote "*Larkin*" instead of "the speaker of the poem". Larkin was very conscious about creating his own artistic integrity, and he saw Dickens both as a positive and as a negative example. Although "*Dockery and Son*" is one of Larkin's dramatic monologues, the conclusion of the text makes it clear that the implied poet makes a confession: the subject of revelation is identical with its object, since there is no

essential difference between himself and Dockery. (Larkin also had a lot to learn from Dickens in such artistic applications of the motif of the double: one will recall, for example, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and, of course, *Dombey and Son*). Larkin is the “less deceived”, but even this does not make any difference:

Life is first boredom, then fear.  
Whether or not we use it, it goes.  
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,  
And age, and then the only end of age.

Larkin is saved from the dilution of a child, not unlike Lily Briscoe is in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (Tolley, *Larkin at Work* 106). But Larkin, as a symbolic son, cannot share the knowledge of the father. The word “death”, repeated so many times in Dickens, has become a taboo word for him: it is replaced by “the only end of age”. Fathers exist, sons exist, but the *and* has disappeared. Continuity is “something hidden from us”.

In the poems about train journeys Larkin senses the oppressive power of the passing of time, and struggles to understand its essence. In another group of poems the implied poet stops time before it is transformed into space, and the result is a vision of timelessness, sometimes of eternity. “Let it always be there,” he says, characteristically, at the end of “Show Saturday” (CP 201). Thus, time and space also signify the conflict between anguish and tranquillity in Larkin. Time causes anxiety because it is unknowable; space is an illusory replacement.

### 3.3.5. Time as Painting and Architecture

“The Card-Players” (CP 177), forming an antithesis to those poems that are based on dramatization, belongs to the group in which time is stopped. The first eight lines of this unorthodox sonnet could take it either towards a conventional Petrarchan or a Shakespearean closure, but after the eighth line tradition is broken: the Shakespearean couplet is in lines 12-13, whereas the last line forms an assonance with line 10: “trees” is faintly echoed by “peace”. In this way, what is inside and what is outside, a place of human civilization and nature, are linked.

Andrew Motion has written about this poem:

Its characters [...] are at first glance comically gross: staggering, pissing, guzzling and farting. Yet in their vileness they enact a ripe drama of self-sufficiency, and Larkin closes the poem in an excited, Yeatsian cadence [...] saluting their “lamplit cave.” [...] This is a world without families, an exclusively and gloatingly male world, where mothers, wives and mistresses are not admitted. (*Philip Larkin* 395)

The poem, thus, also reads “Dockery and Son”: this is the place for men without “a son’s harsh patronage”.<sup>7</sup> It is tempting to read the vision of the poem as an objective correlative of Larkin’s private life; James Booth, for example, reads “The Card-Players” as a representation of the “crude male solidarity” that Larkin experienced in Belfast in the early 1950s (*Philip Larkin: Writer* 25). In the context of the present study, it is a poem constructing a place outside of personal history and lineage. A. T. Tolley has noticed that the last line creates a world out of the four elements: rain stands for water, wind for air, fire for itself, and human bodies (supposedly made of clay) for earth (*My Proper Ground* 122). The image has an archetypal atmosphere, and this is reinforced by the sight of “century-wide trees” in the background and the word “cave” as a metaphor for the interior of the bar. (Of course, the text is also open to a Platonic reading, which would relate to Larkin’s idea of the inevitability of deception by appearances.) The exclamations of the last line testify that the implied poet has come close to a kind of existence that is archaic, static and non-verbal: pure experience in Larkin’s sense of the word. This is the target of his nostalgia, which is even more significant if the reader reckons with a further meaning discussed by David Punter on the basis of Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic theory: the cave is also a metaphor for the womb, and the peace in the last line is the primitive (non-civilized) tranquillity of a life without humiliation and remorse (134-35).

Most critics associate the poem with the atmosphere of Dutch painting; the Dutch names used in the text create such a link. Apart from that, Cézanne (an important painter for Larkin) also offers a ground for a fruitful comparative reading.<sup>8</sup> Cézanne painted five versions of *The Card Players*; Larkin’s poem with the same title shows similarity with the one

---

<sup>7</sup> Some important meanings of the word “patronage” are ‘support given by a patron’, ‘right of appointing somebody’, ‘customer’s support’ and ‘patronizing manner’. All these (and perhaps more) are recalled and rejected in “Dockery and Son”.

<sup>8</sup> Further associations with painters are also possible. In his monograph *Such Deliberate Disguises* Richard Palmer draws a parallel between Larkin and Van Gogh. Since many other artists could be mentioned on the basis of similarity, the real significance of Palmer’s comparison is metonymical: it suggests that pictorial effects are just as important for Larkin as the influence of jazz music richly demonstrated and discussed in the first part of Palmer’s book.

showing three figures playing the cards, watched by a fourth man in the background. As Michael Levey writes, Cézanne “expelled” time from this picture (310). Larkin re-constructs Cézanne’s place in the poem. The close-knit community both in the picture and in the poem creates a space where time stands still. In my reading of Larkin and Cézanne this is the primary function of constructing a “male world” and making this construction an organizing principle: the lack of women and of families excludes the idea of being continued in time. The vision, therefore, belongs to somebody who has taken the advice given by the angry prophet of “This Be The Verse”.

Cézanne’s picture suggests timelessness and intimacy. The triangular composition of the three heavy and robust figures sitting at the table forms a monument of tranquillity. All four pairs of eyes direct our attention towards the centre of the table. On the other hand, the horizontal line of the table is so close to the spectator of the picture that s/he is put in the position of a fourth card player occupying the fourth side of the table, thus determining the perspective. What is impossible in poetry comes true in painting: non-verbal experience has been preserved without any act of verbalization.

Image-making is also the essence of Larkin’s poem, and its self-reflexivity should not be missed: the poem has become identical with the archaic vision it constructed. The experience is that of time transformed into space. The near-epiphany of the last line (“Rain, wind and fire! The secret, bestial peace!”) signifies the peace which follows from this transformation. Larkin had “no idea” why he should aim at preserving experience, as he wrote in the “Statement”, and such poems demonstrate the reason for his vulnerability. His poetry testifies the paradox that preserving experience is possible only through eliminating temporality. This is manifest both in images of death (“Days”, “Wants”, “Dockery and Son”, etc.) and in visions of eternity within life, as in “The Card-Players”. Once again, disclaiming the intention to represent time is both a failure and a success.

Larkin’s passion for Cézanne<sup>9</sup> is a sign of his struggle with the inevitable absurdity of human fate and the paradox of textual representation; an inner struggle that had been going on since his formative years. Impressionism did not satisfy Cézanne as it did not make it possible for him to really keep experience “from oblivion”, to use Larkin’s terminology. His post-impressionism transgressed impressionism by focusing on something beyond the surface of objects and figures. What Larkin recreated in his poem is the act of constructing a symbol of timelessness in a heavy and monumental vision. The allusions to Dutch painting and Cézanne

---

<sup>9</sup> In a letter to James Sutton (a painter himself) Larkin wrote: “Cézanne’s Card players p. 410—wonderful, this, I think...” (Letter 168). The reference is to a book by the art historian John Rewald.



indicate *shared* experience; what remains of the poet's *personal* experience is his desire to preserve it. This desire is represented in the undisturbed tranquillity of the "cave" and the card-players.

Tranquillity, however, is disturbed in other poems; in this respect, "The Building" (*CP* 191-93), with its menacing interior, is a response to "The Card-Players". Larkin describes a hospital:

past these doors are rooms, and rooms past those,  
And more rooms yet, each one further off

And harder to return from; and who knows  
Which he will see, and when?

This vision is in the geometrical centre of the text; it narrows and opens up the interior of the building simultaneously, indicating the temporality of narratives.<sup>10</sup> The word "hospital" is never used in the text; it is a taboo, as "death" is in "Dockery and Son". Still this place is "the" building, which struggles against death as cathedrals used to in former ages. It glitters like a church steeple in the first lines:

Higher than the handsomest hotel  
The lucent comb shows up for miles,

For all the sick people, being here is something sacred, since a hospital is the sanctuary of final hope. It is significant not only for the obvious reason that it may lengthen human lives, but also because it replaces the function of church and religion with its rituals:

some are young,  
Some old, but most of that vague age that claims  
The end of choice, the last of hope; and all

---

<sup>10</sup> "The Building" could be fruitfully compared with other poems about hospitals in post-1945 British poetry, such as John Betjeman's "Good-bye" and "Five o'Clock Shadow", Roy Fuller's "The Other Side" and Elizabeth Jennings's "Sequence in Hospital". Larkin is the only poet focusing on the *space* where sick and dying people exist; the other texts are about the patients.

Here to confess that something has gone wrong.

Confession (even in this ironic and metaphorical meaning) is as important as healing in the physical sense. In line 41 the speaker catches sight of a locked church through the hospital window, and this makes it obvious that one-time sacred rituals can only survive in a secular world. The conclusion of the poem suggests that death can be faced only by creating a kind of transcendence and within the framework of collective ritual:

All know they are going to die.

Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,  
 And somewhere like this. That is what it means,  
 This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend  
 The thought of dying, for unless its powers  
 Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes  
 The coming dark, though crowds each evening try

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

Such collective rituals, however, are illusory. Entering the building or going from one room to another may form narratives, but their temporality always points towards death. The “cave” as a place of security in “The Card-Players” has disappeared and been replaced with an apparently endless series of hospital rooms, which signify that time has been transferred into space, but also that the lack of temporality can only mean the closeness of death.

Death is also the cardinal point of time in those poems that are based on the idea of being *elsewhere*. Otherness means experience itself for Larkin, and his aim is to preserve it from oblivion. “Dublinesque” (CP 178) is a visionary poem constructed out of elements found in memory.<sup>11</sup> The image of the city becomes clearer and clearer as an invisible camera gradually approaches it:

Down stucco sidestreets,

---

<sup>11</sup> Placing “Dublinesque” and “Homage to a Government” next to each other in *High Windows* was probably no accident. The former creates a dialogue with another culture, while the latter sees any kind of change (that is dialogue) as dangerous. The two together suggest the implied poet’s two intertwining axioms: I respect and even like the “other”, but also preserve and defend my autonomy based on my own tradition. But the reasoning is not convincing, and the values of his autonomy are not made clear. Thus, the second poem weakens the first, instead of strengthening it.

Where light is pewter  
 And afternoon mist  
 Brings light in shops  
 Above race-guides and rosaries,  
 A funeral passes.

Life and death, as well as other contrasts, form a unity. Terry Whalen remarks that the duality of “race-guides and rosaries” is a symbol growing organically from the depicted situation (“Strangeness made sense” 166). It is exactly these points and counterpoints as constituents of harmony that make experience worth preserving. In the last stanza, by removing “the film of familiarity”, he reveals the essence of experience. Epiphany is achieved while the implied poet remains in the background. The complexity of the experience of otherness is also preserved: the speaker feels, sees and contemplates something at the same time. Instead of analyzing the vision, he lets it gain power over him. The voice of love and beauty born in a different culture is victorious in the poem, since this is the value offered by the experience:

As they wend away  
 A voice is heard singing  
 Of Kitty, or Katy,  
 As if the name meant once  
 All love, all beauty.

The space of being elsewhere is also a place where human time is advancing towards death, as signified by the funeral march. The voice of poetry is heard as a faint echo of a past experience. The target of desire (“Kitty, or Katy”) has lost its original meaning: the signified and the signifier are separated in the same way as they are in “Maiden Name”. The speaker of the poem (a passive observer in the situation) hears no more of the song than Wordsworth’s persona does in “The Solitary Reaper”. He is alienated, yet his only hope is to write a poem to preserve this experience of death and life.

However, the reverse of being elsewhere also haunted Larkin. He said: “I am always thrilled by the thought of what places look like when I am not there” (qtd. in Booth, *Philip Larkin: Writer* 162). The poem that he made this comment on is “Absences” from *The Less*

*Deceived* (CP 49), a symbolic text of ten lines<sup>12</sup>, which describes a sea when no human being is there. Since the speaker is not a part of the landscape, the whole image is based on his imagination, but the pictorial effect is as unmistakable as in “The Card-Players”:

Rain patters on a sea that tilts and sighs.  
 Fast-running floors, collapsing into hollows,  
 Tower suddenly, spray-haired. Contrariwise,  
 A wave drops like a wall: another follows,  
 Wilting and scrambling, tirelessly at play  
 Where there are no ships and no shallows.

Above the sea, the yet more shoreless day,  
 Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries:  
 They shift to giant ribbing, sift away.

Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!

I am not there, the speaker suggests, but the rainy landscape exists, and time, once again, is transferred into space in line 7: the day can only be imagined as something spatial, even though it is “shoreless”. One should also notice that the exclamation of the last line reflects upon this vision: what is “cleared” of the speaker is beyond human comprehension. Therefore, the implied poet is absent from the image; this is *one* absence. However, both the title and the ecstatic exclamation in the closure (similar to the last line of “The Card-Players”) use the word in the plural: absences. This is particularly enigmatic since the first part of the exclamation is in the first person singular: “Such attics cleared of *me*!” The persona’s absence is multiplied by a repeated act of removal: the implication is that he needs to remove himself from the landscape before he writes a poem about it. But the plural also indicates reciprocity: the landscape is absent from his point of view, too. The target of representation is doubled: it is both the idea of elsewhere, a place not available to the poet’s perception, and his absence

---

<sup>12</sup> “The Card-Players”, “Dublinesque” and “Absences” are symbolic in the sense that Donald Davie uses the term in *Articulate Energy*. In agreement with H. M. McLuhan, he writes: “... Wordsworth comes nearest to symbolist poetry in such poems as ‘The Solitary Reaper’, where he leaves the reader to gather from the poem the feeling, never overtly described, which inspires the poet to write it. This is the poetry of ‘the objective correlative’, which describes not the emotion itself, but a symbolic landscape or action which may stand as its equivalent” (338).

from it. *Something* and *nothing*, presence and absence both shape the text. As a result, this early poem is a clear manifestation of Larkin's poetics of absence.

#### 4. Coda and Conclusion: Larkin from a Hungarian Perspective

In this study I have made an attempt to explore how Larkin constructed his poetics in his poems and other texts. Although the key term I used in the discussion of the poems was *mask*, my goal was not to remove it in the hope that I would find a more authentic face behind it. The question I asked was not “Who is behind the mask”, but rather “What is the mask?” I interpreted Larkin’s masks both as the textually constructed heroes in the texts and as representations of the poet’s identity. This duality explains why I used the method of close reading as well as certain terms currently used in social psychology.

Literally speaking, a mask is an object covering one’s face. In a Hungarian historical novel, the narrator says at the beginning:

I have thieved, and I’ve cheated too. But I’m being honest now, at any rate, in writing it all down truthfully in this book of mine. When you’ve read it, you’ll be able to judge for yourself about my wisdom. Wisdom!—my foolishness, rather, for no man in the world has ever been such a fool. After reading it, will anyone still say that he ever really knew me? Hardly, I think—not even my loyal Djidjia [his wife]. It is only the face of a man that can ever really be known, and a man isn’t his face: the real man is hidden behind the face. (Gárdonyi 9)

The passage suggests that one’s face is a mask, behind which there is a true world that can be revealed. This kind of creative writing follows the pattern of the apocalypse: the mask, the fake face is swept away, and the New Jerusalem of the human personality is shown. The same attitude can also be found in Hungarian lyric poetry. In a poem from 1927 the persona says to his wife: “Now I am wearing a mask, stern and cold, but I will tear it off” (Tóth 215, rough translation mine). Again, the implied poet is convinced that there is something angelic in his personality, which is temporarily hidden by appearances.

There is one more component the novel and the poem I have quoted from share. The last sentence of the relevant paragraph from the novel is “A girl taught me that” (Gárdonyi 9), and the poem ends with an image of the persona lulled by his wife (Tóth 215). It is love that teaches the writer how to get rid of his mask and achieve his personal apocalypse.

The apocalypse signifies a revolution which believes in its own purity, eternal verity and law-giving power. Northrop Frye emphasized this revolutionary element in the Christian apocalypse when he wrote that the idea of Marxist revolution can be derived from biblical

traditions (*The Great Code* 113). Consequently, the attitude and conviction I outlined above lingered on in post-war Hungary. The idea of purity, the conviction that the revolution liberated something that had always been there but oppressed was equally significant for the leaders of the communist revolution and the uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. This appears to be an important element of the horizon of expectation in which a “Hungarian Balokowsky” catches sight of Philip Larkin. I am using Jauss’s term “horizon of expectation” to emphasize the duality implied within it: something that is open to infinity, but also reminds us of the original Greek meaning, *limit*. Larkin was prepared for the fact that audiences would form different interpretive communities: in a radio broadcast I quoted in Chapter 2.1 he said that the experience carried by the poem “will reproduce in somebody else who has never met you and perhaps isn’t even living in the same cultural society as yourself” (*FR* 106).

What opens up and limits my image of Philip Larkin is, first of all, his difference. The way he struggles with the problems of initiation, solitude and death make him *the Other* for a reader in a different country and culture. In contrast with the more openly confessional tone of traditional Hungarian poetry, Larkin wears a mask in most of his poems. Obviously, this mask is not the “fake face” of the Hungarian texts I quoted previously. What is illusion for the two Hungarian authors is reality for Larkin and vice versa: the belief in a pure reality behind the face proves to be mere illusion to him. This difference makes us stumble on Larkin’s unasked question: who is more deceived? A part of the answer can be found in recent tendencies present in Hungarian literature, in poems with mask techniques and role-playing.<sup>1</sup>

Larkin’s masks are creatures of Britain, from my perspective not unlike Eliot’s Prufrock, Geoffrey Hill’s Offa or Carol Ann Duffy’s women figures. These poets are very different, but the ambition to create masks in the process of forming identity, and in this way also creating cohesion in the life work, offers a common denominator.

Social psychology treats creativity, masks and identity as central categories. As Norman N. Holland points out, “creativity [...] is not some special, magical afflatus but a natural, logical series of solutions for some people to demands made by their inner and outer realities” (59). Creating means choosing; for a poet of dramatic lyrics, mask lyrics and monologues this includes selecting masks. A poet with a perspective different both from Larkin’s and mine, Tom Paulin, writes: “Larkin called himself ‘one of nature’s Orange-men’,

---

<sup>1</sup> Hungarian culture and literature should be taken as a synecdoche for wider interpretive communities: Central/Eastern European or post-communist. However, I can only select my examples from a culture that I know fairly well. Needless to say, this study cannot aim at pointing out differences within the large communities I have mentioned, but I trust that the example of Hungarian culture serves as *pars pro toto*.

adopting the mask of an Ulster Protestant, a sort of Belfast Dirk Dogstoerd, in order to ironise his own philistinism” (175). Viewing and assessing Larkin from an Irish perspective is, naturally enough, an attractive and fruitful approach for a Hungarian reader, since the marginal and postcolonial position of Ireland is a possible metonymy for East European and post-communist marginality. My reading of the life work is still different from Paulin’s: I agree about the significance of the starting point, but see the essence elsewhere. Larkin’s experience of alienation in Belfast is that of an Englishman in Ireland (see Whalen “Philip Larkin in Ireland” 162), but the way he recreated it in his poems connects it with the general human feeling of isolation. This is reinforced by his alienation from nature. As Janice Rossen points out: “Throughout Larkin’s work, nature is generally depicted as something that is moving and vital and outside, while his protagonists remain inside, disturbed by nature’s indifference to them” (47).

The isolation I have mentioned is the alienation of the subject from everything outside. The mask is created by this subject or individual, and becomes part of his identity. When a reader in a different cultural context wants to understand the persona of Larkin’s poems, one should view this persona both as a verbal construct and as a character simulating reality. In the poems a verbal *ego* or *self* is created. This is the protagonist of the poem, a simulated human being making his self-image, but also the creature of the implied poet in an English cultural context. The implied poet is a highly paradoxical term. He undoubtedly has a social identity, a burden placed on him by the real poet, but he is also outside any society, as he belongs to the realm of art. The same applies to the implied reader, who mediates between the persona of the poem and the real reader (in my case a Hungarian scholar of Larkin). The tension between the poet (constructing a speaker) and the reader is as important in the meaning of the text as the gap between the reader’s and the poet’s culture.

In this study I made an attempt to explore a kind of poetics that does not reflect upon itself as poetics, yet makes it possible for the poet to base his poetry on it and for the reader to interpret it as poetics. My starting hypothesis was that Larkin’s life work can be read as a cohesive whole, which is pulled together by his firm principles. This cohesion, however, does not imply either that the speakers must be homogeneous or that the poet must be inflexible. The heterogeneity and multivocality of his personae represent Larkin’s openness, but also shed light on the controversies and paradoxes in his poetics. The persona constructed in a poem is a product of the cultural context and the language the poet uses. If we read a life work, rather than individual poems, we are interested in the identity of the implied poet, as it is continually constructed in the texts, while we are also aware that this process can never be



completed. I hope I have shown that Larkin's poetry is a logically organized system based on the firm principles of his poetics. He can rightfully be seen as a poet who was writing one large text all his life.

This is shown not only by the arrangement of the poems in his three mature volumes but also by the fact that the volumes read each other. As an example I will mention the closing poems of the three books. "At Grass" suggests that something is missing from the represented experience, but this absence does not cause any pain; instead, it becomes an integral part of a human condition determined by acceptance and tranquillity. "An Arundel Tomb" emphasizes desire and the impossibility of fulfilment: beauty is only "almost" true. Finally, "The Explosion" draws the conclusion: this "almost" is the essence of poetry. The poet must preserve experience in the texts. Or at least must try; Larkin was aware of the paradoxes in his poetics.

Responding to modernist poetics, Larkin says that the function and duty of poetry is to preserve something that is outside of it: for him, poetry is not about poetry, it is about life. When he suggests that "poetry should begin with emotion in the poet, and end with the same emotion in the reader" (*FR* 65), he intends to elevate poetry to the level of life, to prevent it from being isolated as a form of writing that is only interesting for its own sake. Nevertheless, the feeling of loneliness and alienation that Larkin represents in his poetry suggests that he was conscious of this paradox: emotion is always personal; consequently the reader can never experience the same emotion as the author. In addition, language, as an inadequate medium of non-verbal experience, intervenes. One of the strengths in his poetry (and it strictly follows from his poetics) is the representation of this problem through images of distance, failures of communication and absences.<sup>2</sup>

Subordinating poetry to life also requires humility on the part of the poet. When he suggests that "writing a poem is still not an act of the will" (*RW* 84), he implies that it should be a part of *life* rather than a mirror reflecting it or something that should be admired in isolation. He refuses the neo-traditionalist programme of impersonality, but in most of his major poems constructs the position of the cool observer. His position is best explained by his preference for "the language-as-preserver rather than language-as-means-of-communication" (qtd. in John Shakespeare 13): the responsibility for experience, which is personal, but must

---

<sup>2</sup> In this study I have frequently referred to Donald Davie, both as a representative of the same generation and as the antithesis of Larkin's anti-intellectual tendency. In the concluding chapter of *Articulate Energy* Davie writes: "... if the words in poetry are to be considered in their relations with each other, not in their relations to 'their customary meanings', syntax in the same way is to be considered not in its relation to anything outside the realm of language, but in relation to 'a total form of verbal expression'. This syntax articulates, not 'the world', but 'the world of the poem'" (352). In Larkin, too, the poem has its own "world", but its roots are outside language.

be shared. The consequence was his ideal of poetry as something transparent, while he was also aware of its impossibility as well as of the nature of creative writing as a series of choices. His goal to preserve experience in an intact form was a theory which itself appeared to be alien to life. He never managed to answer the question: what is it that prevents the poet from distorting experience if writing is a selective process? Of course, he did not *intend* to find the answer; for Larkin, it was more important to represent the paradox hidden in the question and in his poetics.

It goes without saying that the interrogative mode and the (re)construction of contradictions is a general feature in modern poetry. Most readers find it exciting because of the stimulating presence of paradoxes, which take many forms in the texts. They often manifest in figures of speech (particularly oxymora), in dialogues, puns, and so forth. The most important method Larkin used is the construction of speakers different from the poet and the structure of the dramatic lyric.

Distinguishing between the actual poet, the implied poet and the reader (as well as the listener, the implied reader and the real reader) is not something that is done for its own sake in literary studies. Failing to see the difference and ignoring it when reading a poem frequently leads to misunderstanding the text and a false assessment of the poet. As Peter Porter remarks, Robert Browning made readers of poetry aware that the speaker of a poem can be any kind of character (4). Treating the persona in the poem as a fictitious figure is similar to our strategy of reading novels and short stories, but when we read poetry we are usually more conscious of the relationship between the author and the hero. The latter is often interpreted as the *other* of the former (as in Bakhtin's theory); moreover, the speaker in the poem is frequently seen as the poet's self-portrait, alter ego or mirror image. Larkin counts on these expectations in his poetry: in some poems he lives up to them, but more often than not, he dislocates such conventional notions and reading strategies.

This is particularly discernable in the poems that can be read as variations on dramatic lyrics. The speaker at the beginning of these texts starts as the full authority of the poem addressing the reader. In the second half of the poem, however, s/he becomes the target of the cognitive agent's gaze, who invites the reader to acquire his/her perspective but also to remember the previous point of view. The tension between the two manifests the two sides of a paradox: Larkin's perceptive agent wants to preserve experience in an intact form, but his cognitive persona is aware of its impossibility. The first agent in "Church Going" and "High Windows" lets experience grab him; the second agent views this event with scepticism. "This

Be The Verse” is a special case: to discover the voice of the cognitive self the reader needs to go back to the title.

The process of identifying both personae and understanding the tension between them is a simulation of deception and self-deception, Larkin’s central subject matter. When beginning the poem for the first time, the reader may think that the voice we hear is an authoritative representation of the poet. The sudden appearance of the other self undermines this notion. What seems to be simple and homogeneous meaning turns out to be paradoxical: the discrepancy between two attitudes and perspectives. The voice of the first speaker should never blind us: the cynicism constructed in the poem must be seen in the context of another attitude. This latter is characterized by the ambition of universal spokespersonship and (particularly in the last volume) by the philosophy and resignation of old age.

Larkin’s following in the wake of other authors of dramatic monologues, mask lyrics and dramatic lyrics (Browning, Eliot, Keats, etc.), forms a poignant contrast with his own openly declared anti-intellectualism and his tendency towards non-literariness. In his “Statement” and other prose pieces he kept on attacking literariness in literature, literariness meaning cosmopolitan attitudes and modernist principles. If poetry is made of poetry (which tendency he sarcastically attacks in the “Statement”), life escapes. In his poetics, the aim of the poet should be the opposite: to construct “poetry-as-preserve”.

What is usually stressed in the critical interpretations of Larkin’s credo is the strong emphasis on preserving experience; the parenthetical reference in the “Statement” to complexity and the ambitious programme of making communication possible (“both for myself and others”) are more frequently overlooked. He wanted to preserve experience “for its own sake”, but (in my reading) he did it in order to make it sure that its complexity remains intact. The only chance that it can simultaneously be carried out “both for myself and others” lies in his trust in language. He knows that the reliability of language is a vulnerable hypothesis (see the changing function of names in “Maiden Name” or “At Grass”). But relying on language does not result in fixed meanings; he is in constant search of what it is that words like “love”, “death”, and so on mean. Therefore, he also invites the reader to follow suit: he expects us to construct the meaning because this is the only way we can find the way back to the inspiring experience through the poem.<sup>3</sup>

This strong emphasis on primary experience frequently blinds Larkin’s readers to the significance of other literary texts in his poetics. Although he created his own myth about the

---

<sup>3</sup> To use another term: Larkin both preserves and breaks with Wordsworth’s “fiduciary symbolism” as discussed by Davie (289-305) and commented on by John Barrell (145-147).

non-literary poet (and, as I have attempted to demonstrate, this became a major and fruitful principle in his role-playing), he always kept an eye on what other poets wrote. His two collections of essays, as well as *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*<sup>4</sup> provide enough evidence of this. Characteristically, he finishes the “Statement” with this sentence: “Of the contemporary scene I can say only that there are not enough poems written according to my ideas, but then if there were I should have less incentive to write myself” (RW 79). His experience of absence is also important in this sense: he found an empty space in the contemporary literary scene that he intended to fill.

Larkin’s is a poetics of experience, full of fruitful controversies from the beginning. Since experience is non-verbal by definition in his theory, death is his central subject matter as *the* non-verbal experience *par excellence*. The controversy is that death is not the only experience, neither is experience always non-verbal. Larkin was fully aware of “linguistic” or verbal experiences, as I attempted to demonstrate in my discussion of “Maiden Name” (Chapter 2.6). This duality makes him an anti-modernist poet who is still conscious of the post-modern world he lives in.

The dichotomies mentioned previously become an organizing force in the poems. He polarizes his textually constructed alter egos and masks, a method he learned from his master, Thomas Hardy. This polarity can be discerned both in individual poems and the life work read as a large whole. Polarization eventually results in Bakhtinian polyphony and dialogicity. The richness of his poetry rests on the interaction of equally valid voices. I mean not only the juxtaposition of two agents in his dramatic lyrics but also his representation of ambivalent emotions. Yearning and terror are simultaneously and provocatively present in his verse, and this turns the reader’s attention towards the complexity of the non-verbal experience that Larkin mentions in the “Statement”.

His most complex experience is the passing of time, which is represented in his poetry both as markedly personal (time driving the subject towards death) and as something shared (time as constructed and structured by cultural communities). The notion of continuity is contrasted with the notion of time units and spatiality, which adds a further paradox to the oppositions mentioned previously. The major philosophical poems of his mature volumes

---

<sup>4</sup> Larkin was requested to edit this anthology in the late sixties. He took the job very seriously, since he thought that this would offer him an unparalleled chance to provide a justification for his literary taste and principles. In the academic year 1970-71 he read (or at least consulted) every volume of British poetry that was available at Oxford. With this “unbiased” method he hoped to prove that the mainstream of 20<sup>th</sup>-century British verse was the “English line” (provincial poetry) rather than the neo-traditionalism of the modernists. The result was a volume containing texts by 207 poets (many of them represented by one poem only). Most critics agree that it was precisely this comprehensive approach that eventually prevented Larkin from achieving his goal.

(including “Aubade” as a central text of a fragmentary and never published last volume) all represent the efforts of the persona to understand time and face death. “Church Going” in *The Less Deceived* asks questions about the future, but finds a vague answer in the past: a church building (not religion) is important because it represents past experience. The title poem of *The Whitsun Weddings* represents time as spatial continuity and sees the end of a journey in the future constructed as a fertility metaphor. “The Building” in *High Windows* is about the present: in the hospital time stands still; the repetitive and iterative mode of the last lines does not allow the patients and their visitors to structure time. After this tripartite vision of past, future and present, “Aubade” is about the absurdity of human existence, since time relations cease to exist in death. This is, of course, only one possible construct of meanings in Larkin, but I hope I have demonstrated the cohesion of the life works. It is coherent exactly because numerous readings of such interacting significations are possible.

**Abbreviations**

*CP* Philip Larkin. *Collected Poems*. London: Faber, 1988.

*FR* Philip Larkin. *Further Requirements. Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews*. London: Faber, 2001.

*RW* Philip Larkin. *Required Writing. Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*. London: Faber, 1983.

*SL* Philip Larkin. *Selected Letters*. London: Faber, 1992.

## Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 5<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1988.
- . *Natural Supernaturalism*. New York: Norton, 1971.
- . *The Mirror and the Lamp. Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 1958.
- Adler, Alfred. *Életismeret [The Science of Living]*. Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1998.
- Alvarez, A. *The New Poetry*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962.
- Andrews, Malcolm. *Dickens and the Grown-up Child*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994.
- Auden, W. H. *Collected Poems*. London: Faber, 1994.
- . "The Virgin and the Dynamo." *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage Books, 1968. 61-71.
- Bayley, John. *Selected Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.
- Berne, Eric. *Games People Play. The Psychology of Human Relationships*. London: Penguin, 1968.
- Barrell, John. *Poetry, language and politics*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991.
- Booth, James. "A Room without a View: Larkin's Empty Attic." *Bête Noire* 12-13 (1991-92): 320-329.
- . "Philip Larkin: Lyricism, Englishness and Postcoloniality." Stephen Regan, ed. *Philip Larkin*. New Casebooks ser. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997.
- . *Philip Larkin. The Poet's Plight*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- . *Philip Larkin: Writer*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.
- . "Why Larkin's Poetry Gives Offence." *English* 46. 184 (1997): 1-19.
- Bowman, Deborah. "'An Instrument of Articulation': Empson and the Movement." Zachary Leader, ed. *The Movement Reconsidered. Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 155-176.
- Bradford, Richard. *First Boredom, Then Fear. The Life of Philip Larkin*. London: Peter Owen, 2005.
- Bristow, Joseph. "The Obscenity of Philip Larkin." *Critical Inquiry* 21 (1994): 156-181.
- Bull, William T. *Time, Tense, and the Verb*. Berkely: U of California P, 1960.

- Cameron, Deborah. "'The Virtues of Good Prose': Verbal Hygiene." Zachary Leader, ed. *The Movement Reconsidered. Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 139-154.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.
- Carey, John. "The Two Philip Larkins." James Booth, ed. *New Larkins for Old. Critical Essays*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000. 51-65.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *W. H. Auden. A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981.
- Castle, Terry. "The Lesbianism of Philip Larkin." Zachary Leader, ed. *The Movement Reconsidered. Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 79-105.
- Cauldwell, Richard T. "Larkin's Other Voice." Jonathan Payne, ed. *Linguistic Approaches to Literature*. Birmingham: U of Birmingham, 1995. 117-128.
- Chesters, Graham. "Philip Larkin and the Poetics of Resistance." *About Larkin* 23 (2007): 26-28.
- Childs, Peter. *Modernism*. The New Critical Idiom ser. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Conquest, Robert, ed. *New Lines*. London: Macmillan, 1967.
- Cooper, Stephen. *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*. Brighton: Sussex Academic, 2004.
- Crace, Jim. *Being Dead*. London: Penguin, 2000.
- Crawford, Robert and David Kinloch, ed. *Reading Douglas Dunn*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1992.
- Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin, 1999.
- Davie, Donald. *Purity of Diction in English Verse and Articulate Energy*. London: Penguin, 1992.
- Day Lewis, Cecil. *Poems of C. Day Lewis 1925-1972*. London: Jonathan Cape and The Hogarth P, 1977.
- De Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-Facement." *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1984. 67-81.
- . *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism. The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993.
- Dickens, Charles. *Dombey and Son*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1995.
- Dilworth, Thomas. "Keats's Shakespeare." *The Times Literary Supplement* 5638, April 22 2011: 15.



- D. Rácz, István. *Költők és maszkok. Identitáskereső versek az 1945 utáni brit költészetben*. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1996.
- . "This Be the Light Verse." *British and American Studies* XVI (2010): 113-122.
- Duffy, Carol Ann. *Mean Time*. London: Anvil P Poetry, 1993.
- Dunn, Douglas. *New and Selected Poems 1966-1988*. New York: The Ecco P, 1989.
- Durrant, Geoffrey. *Wordsworth and the Great System*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970.
- Eliot, T. S. *Selected Prose*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1963.
- . *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism. Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*. London: Faber, 1975.
- . "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Selected Prose*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1963: 21-30.
- Ewart, Gavin. *The Collected Ewart, 1933-1980*. London: Hutchinson, 1980.
- Fenton, James. "Philip Larkin: Wounded by Unshrapnel." *The Strength of Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. 45-64.
- Ford, George H. and Lauriat Lane, Jr., ed. *The Dickens Critics*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1961.
- Fraser, George. *Essays on Twentieth-Century Poets*. Leicester: Leicester UP, 1977.
- Fromm, Erich. *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1971.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1971.
- . *The Great Code*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.
- Fuller, Roy. *The Individual and His Times*. London: Athlone P, 1983.
- Gardner, Helen, ed. *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*. London: Book Club Associates, 1975.
- Gardner, Philip. "'One does one's best': Larkin posthumous." *Critical Survey* 1. 2 (1989): 194-199.
- Gárdonyi, Géza. *Slave of the Huns [A láthatatlan ember]*, trans. Victor C. Ambrus. Budapest: Corvina, 1969.
- Goffman, Erving. *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. London: Penguin, 1990.
- . *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin, 1990.
- Goodby, John. "'The importance of being elsewhere', or 'No man is an Ireland': self, selves and social consensus in the poetry of Philip Larkin." *Critical Survey* 1. 2 (1989): 131-138.
- Goode, J. "The More Deceived—A Reading of Deceptions." George Hartley, ed. *Philip Larkin 1922-1985. A Tribute*. London: Marvel P, 1988. 126-134.

- Gregson, Ian. "The Dialogic in *Terry Street* and After." Robert Crawford and David Kinlock, ed. *Reading Douglas Dunn*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1992: 17-31.
- Hamburger, Michael. *Philip Larkin: A Retrospect*. London: Enitharmon P, 2002.
- Hamilton, Ian. *A Poetry Chronicle. Essays and Reviews*. London: Faber, 1973.
- Hankiss, Elemér. "A félelem és a társadalomtudományok." *Mozgó Világ* 23. 7 (1997): 63-80.
- Hardy, Thomas. *The Works of Thomas Hardy*. Wordsworth Poetry Library. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1995.
- Hart, Henry. *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1986.
- Hartley, Emma and Vanessa Thorpe. "How the young Philip Larkin courted *Trouble at Willow Gables*." *The Observer* 22 April 2001: 3.
- Hartley, Jean. *Philip Larkin, the Marvell Press and Me*. Manchester: Carcanet P, 1989.
- Heaney, Seamus. "The Main of Light." Stephen Regan, ed. *Philip Larkin*. New Casebooks ser. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997. 23-31.
- . *The Redress of Poetry*. London: Faber, 1995.
- Holland, Norman N. *Poems in Persons. An Introduction to the Psychoanalysis of Literature*. New York: Norton Library, 1975.
- Hollindale, Peter. "Philip Larkin's 'The Explosion'." *Critical Survey* 1. 2 (1989): 139-146.
- Hollington, Michael, ed. *Charles Dickens. Critical Assessments*. Mountfield: Helm Information, 1995. Vol. III.
- Hughes, Ted. Introduction. Keith Douglas. *The Complete Poems*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987. XV-XXV.
- . *Poetry in the Making. An Anthology of Poems and Programmes from Listening and Writing*. London: Faber, 1967.
- Ingelbien, Raphaël. "The Uses of Symbolism: Larkin and Eliot." James Booth, ed. *New Larkins for Old. Critical Essays*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000. 130-143.
- James, Oliver. "The Larkin Syndrome." *The Tiddler: The Observer's Little Bit Extra* No 2 (1997): 1-19.
- Jenkins, Alan. "'I thought I Was So Tough': Thom Gunn's Postures." Zachary Leader, ed. *The Movement Reconsidered. Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 187-203.
- Joseph, Jenny. "Larkin the Poet: The Old Fools." George Hartley, ed. *Philip Larkin 1922-1985. A Tribute*. London: Marvel P, 1988. 119-125.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.

- Kuby, Lolette. *An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man. A Study of Philip Larkin's Poetry*. The Hague: Mouton, 1974.
- Langbaum, Robert. *The Mysteries of Identity: A Theme in Modern Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- . *The Poetry of Experience*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1957.
- Larkin, Philip. *A Girl in Winter*. London: Faber, 1984.
- . *Collected Poems*. London: Faber, 1988.
- . *Early Poems and Juvenilia*. London: Faber, 2005.
- . *Further Requirements. Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews*. London: Faber, 2001.
- . Letters to James Sutton. Brynmor Jones Library, Hull, United Kingdom
- . *Required Writing. Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*. London: Faber, 1983.
- . *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions*. London: Faber, 2002.
- . *Selected Letters*. London: Faber, 1992.
- Leader, Zachary, ed. *The Movement Reconsidered. Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
- Lerner, Laurence. "Larkin's strategies." *Critical Survey* 1. 2 (1989): 113-121.
- . *Philip Larkin*. Writers and their Works ser. Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997.
- Levey, Michael. *A festészet rövid története*. Budapest: Corvina, n.d.
- Lodge, David. "Philip Larkin: the Metonymic Muse." Dale Salwak, ed. *Philip Larkin: The Man and his Work*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989. 118-128.
- . *Working with Structuralism. Essays and reviews on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Lomax, Marion. "Larkin with Women." Michael Baron, ed. *Larkin with Poetry*. Leicester: English Association Conference Papers, 1997. 31-46.
- Longino, Victoria. "The Alien Moment: Philip Larkin and Gender." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 9. 2 (2003): 91-104.
- Longley, Edna. "Poète Maudit Manqué." George Hartley, ed. *Philip Larkin 1922-1985. A Tribute*. London: Marvel P, 1988. 220-231.
- Marsh, Nicholas. *Philip Larkin: The Poems*. Analysing Texts ser. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Martin, Bruce K. "Larkin's Humanity Viewed from Abroad." Dale Salwak, ed. *Philip Larkin: The Man and his Work*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989. 140-149.
- Mayhew, Henry. *London's Underworld*. London: Spring Books, 1950.

- McKeown, Andrew and Charles Holdefer, ed. *Philip Larkin and the Poetics of Resistance*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006.
- Mendelson, Edward. "Auden's Revision of Modernism." Harold Bloom, ed. *W. H. Auden*. Modern Critical Views ser. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986. 111-119.
- Miller, Karl. "Boys on the Move." Zachary Leader, ed. *The Movement Reconsidered. Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 177-186.
- Morrison, Blake. "'Still Going on, All of It': The Movement in the 1950s and the Movement Today." Zachary Leader, ed. *The Movement Reconsidered. Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 16-33.
- . *The Movement. English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980.
- Motion, Andrew. *Keats*. London: Faber, 1997.
- . *Philip Larkin*. Contemporary Writers ser. London: Methuen, 1982.
- . *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*. London: Faber, 1993.
- Nelson, Harland S. "Staggs's Gardens." Robert B. Patlow, Jr., ed. *The Dickens Studies Annual*, 3. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1973.
- Nyilasy, Balázs. "*A szó társadalmi lelke*". N.p.: Cserépfalvi, 1996.
- O'Neill, Michael. "'Fond of What He's Crapping On': Movement Poetry and Romanticism." Zachary Leader, ed. *The Movement Reconsidered. Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 270-291.
- Opie, Iona and Peter, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983.
- Osborne, John. *Larkin, Ideology and Critical Violence. A Case of Wrongful Conviction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- . Letter. *About Larkin* 29 (April 2010): 28-29.
- Panofsky, Erwin. "Idő atya" ["Father Time"]. József Pál, ed. *Az ikonológia elmélete*, Vol. II. Szeged: József Attila Tudományegyetem, 1986. 450-483.
- Parkinson, R. N. "To Keep our Metaphysics Warm." *The Critical Survey* 5 (Winter 1971): 224-233.
- Palmer, Richard. *Such Deliberate Disguises. The Art of Philip Larkin*. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Paulin, Tom. "Into the Heart of Englishness." Stephen Regan, ed. *Philip Larkin*. New Casebooks ser. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997. 160-177.

- Pelizzon, Penelope V. "Native Carnival: Philip Larkin's Puppet-theatre of Ritual." James Booth, ed. *New Larkins for Old. Critical Essays*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000. 213-223.
- Petch, Simon. *The Art of Philip Larkin*. Sydney: Sydney UP, 1985.
- Pinsky, Tony. "Dale Salwak, ed., *Philip Larkin: The Man and His Work*." Review. *Critical Survey* 1. 2 (1989): 213-215.
- Porter, Peter. "The recording angels." *The Times Literary Supplement* March 15, 1991: 3-4.
- Press, John. *A Map of Modern English Verse*. London: Oxford UP, 1969.
- Prince, Gerald. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1987.
- Pritchard, William H. "Donald Davie, The Movement, and Modernism." Zachary Leader, ed. *The Movement Reconsidered. Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 228-246.
- Punter, David. "Philip Larkin: Humiliation and Survival." C. C. Barfoot, ed. *In Black and Gold. Contiguous Traditions in Post-War British and Irish Poetry*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994. 119-135.
- Raban, Jonathan. *The Technique of Modern Fiction*. London: Edward Arnold, 1968.
- Rader, Ralph W. "The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms." *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1976): 131-151.
- Raina, Badri. *Dickens and the Dialectic of Growth*. Madison, Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 1986.
- Raine, Craig. "Counter-Intuitive Larkin." Zachary Leader, ed. *The Movement Reconsidered. Essays on Larkin, Amis, Gunn, Davie, and Their Contemporaries*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 62-78.
- Regan, Stephen. *Philip Larkin*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992.
- , ed. *Philip Larkin*. New Casebooks ser. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997.
- Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Methuen, 1983.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Rossen, Janice. *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.
- Rowe, M. W. *Philip Larkin: Art and Self. Five Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Rumens, Carol. "'I don't understand cream cakes, but I eat them': Distance and difference in *A Girl in Winter*." *About Larkin* 29 (April 2010): 7-12.

- . "Philip Larkin's Lost Childhood." *Self into Song. Newcastle/Bloodaxe Poetry Lectures*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2007. 28-47.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. New York: Pocket Books, 1966.
- Shakespeare, John. "'A few suggestions'." *The Times Literary Supplement* 5531, April 3 2009: 12-15.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare*. London: Chancellor P, 1982.
- Shaw, Marion. "Larkin and Tennyson." *About Larkin* 28 (2009): 21-26.
- Simpson, Matt. "Never such innocence—a reading of Larkin's 'Sunny Prestatyn'." *Critical Survey* 1. 2 (1989): 176-182.
- Smith, Stan. "Something for Nothing: Late Larkins and Early." *English* Vol. 49, No. 195 (2000): 255-275.
- Sorensen, Roy. "Fooling ourselves." *The Times Literary Supplement* 5631, March 4 2011, 22-24.
- Swarbrick, Andrew. *Out of Reach. The Poetry of Philip Larkin*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995.
- Thwaite, Anthony. *Poetry Today*. London: Longman, 1996.
- Timms, David. *Philip Larkin*. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973.
- Tolley, A. T. *Larkin at Work*. Hull: U of Hull P, 1997.
- . *My Proper Ground: A Study of the Work of Philip Larkin and Its Development*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1991.
- Tomlinson, Charles. "The Middlebrow Muse." *Essays in Criticism* 7 (1957): 208-217.
- Tóth, Árpád. *Összes versei, versfordításai és novellái*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1974.
- Underhill, Hugh. "Poetry of departures: Larkin and the power of choosing." *Critical Survey* 1. 2 (1989): 183-193.
- Vlad, Eduard. *The Glory and the Gloom—Philip Larkin between Deconstruction and Logocentrism*. Constanta: Monograph, 1997.
- Wain, John. "Engagement or Withdrawal?" *Critical Quarterly* 6 (Summer 1964): 167-178.
- . "The Importance of Philip Larkin." *The American Scholar* 55. 3 (1985): 349-364.
- Walder, Dennis, ed. *Literature in the Modern World. Critical Essays and Documents*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Watson, J. R. "The Other Larkin." *Critical Quarterly* 17. 4 (1975): 347-360.
- Watt, R. J. C., ed. *Philip Larkin. A Concordance to the Poetry of Philip Larkin*. Hildersheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1995.

---. "'Scragged by embryo-Leavises': Larkin reading his poems." *Critical Survey* 1. 2 (1989): 172-175.

Wesling, Donald. *Bakhtin and the Social Moorings of Poetry*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2003.

Whalen, Terry. *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1986.

---. "'Strangeness made sense': Philip Larkin in Ireland." *The Antigoneish Review* 107 (Autumn 1997): 157-169.

Wheatley, David. "Instant pictures." *The Times Literary Supplement* 5598, July 16 2010: 3-5.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge, 1981.

Wordsworth, William. *The Poems*. London: Oxford UP, 1923.

Yeats, W. B. *Yeats's Poems*. London: Papermac, 1990.